

Delegation to the Trustees of the Peel District School Board
on the
Proposal to Close Five Enhanced Learning Classes for 2006/07
and
the Gifted Review Process

Presented by Carolynne Ball
on behalf of the Association for Bright Children, Peel Chapter

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“The Educational Rights of the Gifted Child”
by Dr. Barbara Clark

Throughout our global village many of us have been deeply committed to human rights. Nowhere will you find this commitment as universally expressed as when the rights of children are in question. Educators are especially concerned that all children have full rights to learning. There is, however, a group of children that is consistently disregarded when issues of educational rights are discussed and educational decisions are made. That group has in common their intelligence, their faster pace of learning, the level of complexity and depth with which they view their world, and the diversity with which they express their views. We call these children gifted.

Recently there have been those among us who would disregard even the label we have given them, insisting that to give them another title would alter the low priority in which they are held and would generate more acceptance. It is true of this group that they seem often to represent a threat or engender negative attitudes among the very professionals that should be concerned with their welfare. However, a title change is unlikely to change these children, nor the characteristics that make them resist the conformity that would enhance their place in the educational community. It is also true that no one can be against talent development. Everyone can support the development of talent for all children in every part of our planet. The fact remains that there are children who are already different. Who by a favorable interaction of biology and environmental circumstance have developed unique needs. Their learning is different; their pace is different; their understanding of issues, content, relationships, and innovation is different.

These children are gifted. These children are not just gifted two hours a week or after school or during the summer or when the resource room is available or when they are performing. They are not just gifted in problem solving or research or critical thinking. They may express their giftedness in ways that are social, emotional, intuitive, creative, or even unacceptable, but if given the chance, they will express their giftedness. It is that chance, that opportunity, that is too often missing in our education system. We now know that intelligence, however it is expressed, cannot be developed in a vacuum. It must be carefully nurtured, for if the functions of the brain cannot progress they will regress. In other words, we must use it or lose it!

Some cleverly say that the gifted can get along in spite of the educational system, that cream always rises to the top, that you are born gifted, and that the boredom they experience in schools will do no harm. Some, by their actions, tell us that we have neither time nor money to be concerned with such a small, unique group of children. It is to these clever members of our neighborhoods, our communities, our elected bodies of government, our school boards, our administrations, and our teaching profession that we must speak, knowledgeably, eloquently, loudly, and often. In a democracy equal opportunity cannot, must not mean the same opportunity, for as (Thomas) Jefferson once said, “There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people.” Every child is unique. All children have the right to develop their own potential. All children must include gifted children.

from Barbara Clark, Growing Up Gifted, 6th Edition, Prentice Hall, 2001, ISBN: 13-094437-8.

Good evening, Chair McDougald, Trustees, members of the administration and the public. My name is Carolynne Ball. I am speaking for the Association for Bright Children in Peel and a large group of parents and concerned residents. I am here as a resident, a voter, a taxpayer and a parent of gifted children. I am joined by Elsa Irani, a graduate of the Peel gifted program.

I am here tonight because, next month, as trustees you will be voting on a proposal to close five Enhanced Learning Classes in the Board. Five classes out of 30: 16% - a reduction of 115 spaces of the current 706. We believe such a decision would be premature, based on erroneous information and an enormous mistake.

It would appear the agenda tonight is not overly heavy. Chair McDougald, with your indulgence and that of your fellow trustees, you might want to note this is only the second time ABC Peel has appeared before this committee in over eight years. We think that the subject matter is so important, it requires proper examination. If I appear to be over-running your time allocation, I truly hope that you will value the content more than the very few extra minutes it might take.

Like all parents, we are proud of our children, but they are challenging and they face numerous challenges. This is just like all kids, and yet it needs to be acknowledged that being gifted doesn't guarantee you an easy go of things.

Let us look at the real world of two of these children. A typical six-year-old knows there are four seasons of the year, and night- and day-time. A typical six-year-old is satisfied with that. In contrast, this gifted boy, let's call him Rajiv, is compelled to understand what fascinates him – so Rajiv interrupts lessons at school. He gazes at the pictures and charts on the wall and tries to pull it all together – Rajiv needs to know and to understand. Other kids head off to play, but he presses the teacher for more. He heads home from school, and gets out the globe. An hour later, after help from Mom, the globe, a tennis ball and a table light, Rajiv understands the rotations, the revolutions, and the connection between the movements of sun, earth and moon – the time zones, the equator. And his mother is just happy they did not get into tides and the gravity of the sun and moon.

Another child, Philippa, in grade 3, asks her father, "Dad, why does money have value?" Dad is an engineer, so his economics is basic, but they talk about money being a store of value, a medium of exchange, and the difficulty of bartering eggs for gasoline and cars. Then Philippa drags out Dad's coin collection, pulls out different currencies and scours the newspaper for exchange rates. Two years later, now in the enhanced grade 5 class at Dixie Public School, among many other things, Philippa and her class learn more about money and banking, and visit the Toronto Stock Exchange. Connections are made.

Both of these very real children exhibit a thirst for new and varied knowledge. That thirst won't be shared by, appreciated by or even accepted by most of their age peers. Usually, other children don't understand what they are talking about and see them as a bit strange. Often gifted children have acquaintances, but no friends that they can really relate to or interact with. Here, Rajiv and Philippa show a glimpse of their potential and their needs, and

we must note that it was both at home and at school that those are met. These are gifted child and these are the children we live with and love.

The internationally acknowledged expert, Dr. Linda Silverman, states that gifted children develop in an asynchronous or uneven manner. They are more complex and intense than their age peers, they feel out-of-sync with them and with the "age-appropriate curriculum." Quite apart from their learning and intellectual abilities, their greatest need is to be in an environment where it is safe to be different. In reality, the brighter the child, the lower the social self-concept in the regular classroom. Their social self-concept immediately improves with their true peers. So, let us look at how that might be investigated.

The Peel Board is currently half way through a three-year review of its gifted program. The broad intent of this review is welcomed by us. At this time, no key objectives have been established. While students are the supposed beneficiaries, students and parents have not been consulted on the needs of the gifted program. We live with these children, we know them best and we must be involved. Transparency in carrying out this study is critical. It is ABC's position that losing classes now is the wrong solution to the fundamental problems. Such action would devalue and undermine the study itself.

Looking now at numbers - We are told that projected numbers for next year show these five classes will not be needed. At SEAC and since, ABC Peel has asked for the projections, but despite more than one request, and commitments made, they have not been provided. A reading of such a projection report must be framed with other facts. What direction was provided to principals for identifying students who may need identification or placement? Have directions changed over the past three or more years? Why would these classes not have students, though they had them in the past? How can Somerset school which currently has 44 students for the 46 available spaces in its two Junior ELCs have fewer than 23 students projected for next year? Where have those children gone? Has one year of central Brampton students so underperformed? Have the administration at schools and the central office made decisions that should happen during the mandated IPRC process, with the parents present? If so, that is against the intent of the Act and regulations. These are all valid questions that need to be answered before deductions and decisions are made.

As you are aware, the student population in the Peel District School Board continues to grow, by thousands each year. Yet the number of identified gifted students declines. For example, as part of a trend, in 2003 -2004, nearly 2900 of the Board's 140,000 or so students were identified as gifted. The following year, 95 fewer gifted students. Why are there fewer now than before, though the student population has increased by over 5000? ABC challenges the idea that the population of Peel is becoming less likely to be gifted than in the past.

Regrettably, we must suggest the answer that you need to address: the Board continues to fail to identify and place children who are gifted. Before class capacity is altered, identification is a key issue that must be addressed. In the full version of this presentation, we address the systemic failure to effectively manage the CCAT as a screening tool. We believe it has an enormous impact on identification rates and results. In Peel schools, the CCAT – the Canadian Cognitive Abilities Test – is used with great reluctance before the usual grade 4 timing. If the child is in earlier grades, many parents report to us schools that

say “We only test for giftedness at Grade 4”. The published board policy states otherwise: CCAT can be administered prior to grade 4, at a cost of less than \$30 per child. Another factor in this continuing under-identification: some years ago the board’s psychology services had to focus on the provincial ISA process; full gifted assessments by its psychology professionals stopped. But, since that stand-still period, there have been no compensating catch-up of assessments or on a review of its effect on identification rates.

ABC also proposes a review of how the CCAT results are understood and shared by schools. CCAT testing is done for grade 4 students soon after the return to school in January. The results are machine scored by the publisher and promptly returned to the Board. For some schools those CCAT results may be discussed with some parents in a meaningful way, by well-informed classroom teachers, by the end May of that school year. This allows time for an IPRC and appropriate placement for a September start in grade 5. Yet some other parents, far too many, have to wait 6 or more months to receive the results. In fact, some never receive them, or receive them from teachers who have had insufficient or no training in the value of the information. Of those results that are never shared, some are later found to have been above the cutoff for gifted identification. As a result, identification may be delayed or may never happen. How can a professionally and strongly managed Board allow this to persist? Why has the Board not established required timelines, processes and training for the sharing of these results?

Overall, the Board’s published criteria with CCAT provides a norm of the top 3% of children that might be identified as gifted – yet now Peel actually has less than 2% of its students identified. So, the Board has about 30% less identified than the Canadian norm or standard. Surely we cannot be expected to believe that our children in Peel are less able than those elsewhere across Canada. If the lower numbers are in any way a result of the changing demographic in this area, then we are failing gifted children who may be in French Immersion, have English as a second language, or parents who have not yet learned how to advocate for their children. Have the rights of new Canadians, their language and a common culture of respect for teacher and school authority become barriers to identification?

More on CCAT: There used to be a CCAT in grade 6. This was terminated several years ago as a cost saving measure. The Board made a formal commitment to assess the process and see if the elimination of this test resulted in fewer gifted identifications. We believe that it has – but this commitment to assess the impact has not been upheld – or if it has it has not reported back to SEAC.

Board staff has said that many gifted children choose the valued alternative programs, such as the International Business and Tech, the Arts, the SciTech, and the International Baccalaureate programs. But none of those start before grade 6, and has anyone researched or have the data to support this hypothesis, and so answer the question of why? Over three years ago, the Principal and Superintendent for a school (which we can name) were asked to establish why students were leaving the gifted program after grades 5 and 6. A commitment was made, but it never happened, and no credible reason was provided for that failure. It would seem that parents and students are being told of the benefits, glamour and resources of the alternative programs. But who talks of and promotes the core values,

potential and benefits of gifted programming within the Board? These alternative programs warrant mention in the Directions handbook, but special education and gifted, and their benefits, fail to be mentioned. If children and parents are really choosing these alternative programs, then this needs to be both validated by the Gifted Review and the reasons determined. Perhaps some of the reasons are outlined as follows?

There are problems and issues with the content and delivery at many enhanced learning classes and with much of the in-school enhanced learning programs. There are some marvelous, exceptional teachers and support staff out there, but not enough. There are no standards or overall direction for the enhanced classes; there is no consistency in content, methods, or time allocated to the in-school program. The support provided to these teachers to deliver these programs has diminished and deteriorated – as has the attitude towards gifted education. The Peel Board gifted program used to be the envy of North America and much of the world. Training and support was provided and there was a proud and positive attitude held by those who administered it, supported it and taught within it. What has happened in recent years in the way of professional development for teachers and administrators regarding gifted education? Virtually nothing. There is little substantive ongoing training, support or assistance provided to the ISELP or ELC teachers.

Despite all of this, we acknowledge that the current program does have value. It has worked extremely well in the past, and in some places it still does. I will now ask Elsa Irani to speak to her personal experiences in the gifted program in Peel.

- Why the closures would matter to me
- My experiences in my decade in the gifted program in Peel
- The gifted program's impact on me as a person – my confidence in comfort in myself and who I am
- How the gifted program's impacted my education and my interaction with educators and peers

Thank you Elsa.

Lastly, I turn to the subject of the communication between school and system administration, and parents. Honesty and transparency are critical and all too often they do not exist. Parents are not informed, or are misinformed by some schools and staff in many, many areas - such as identification procedures, funding, placement options, IPRC processes, placement for student with dual exceptionalities, and more. We have examples we would be willing to share with you to substantiate this apparently extreme statement.

Before 2001, the criteria for the Primary Enhanced Learning Class – grades 1 to 3, required the top 1% for placement. After January 2001 this numerical criteria was changed to accept the top 3% by the CCAT, or 2% if based on a professionally administered test. So, the range of acceptance was expanded two or three fold for those grades. However the number of children being placed in these primary classes has decreased. Why? ABC suggests that information is not clearly and accurately shared. In reality, some parents might investigate and then, after patient negotiation, establish their child's rights to gifted education. But, also

in reality, many, many parents trust school officials, accept what they are told, and walk away, in effect abandoning the support that children need and are due to receive. The Act says they are due that support. Peel policy also says it is due. But the children are denied the access they are due.

Another example on failed communication: at virtually the same time, three families were told by staff that they might not prefer to place their child in a contained enhanced class because each child would be the only grade 1 student there. So it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In other areas of education, changed practices of this board have been implemented, apparently without assessing or discussing the underlying merits or risks implied. Acceleration is one such, though we are not here to suggest acceleration as a remedy for today's problems – in fact, acceleration is not even a special education issue. Another concern is the requirement, after identification as gifted, that all enter the in-school learning program (ISELP) for three months, before consideration of placement in a contained class (the ELC). Why? The teachers have already had months, if not years, to understand the child's needs, regardless of whether they are identified or not – why are three more months needed? Ongoing assessment of needs is part of each educator's responsibility to all children.

It is ABC's position that the fundamental issue is that children are not being identified and appropriate placement is not being offered. This, we submit, is endemic and systemic. So, we propose that this Board returns to its well documented IPRC and other special education procedures as set out in its January 2001 procedures. These exist; they must be practiced in the best interests of the children. As the quotation goes: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

In conclusion, ABC Peel recommends that, as Trustees, you direct staff to transparently and openly re-assess the data, and provide full and valid reasons at SEAC before you consider the proposal for class closures. Further, we ask that you direct that the research design of the gifted review should address the core issues of the gifted education within Peel, and that it be conducted to address the concerns we have stated this evening, with an open process that sees student needs as central to its objectives.

Until such time as the review is completed, evaluated and discussed in an open forum, a moratorium on any enhanced learning class closures is essential. We request that you vote against these class closures.

Chair McDougald and Trustees, Thank you for your time.