

The importance of views and parent-teacher partnerships

by Allan Braun

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Recently, while chaperoning another group of students to Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama, I became quite disheartened because it became quite obvious to me that SCI-VIS 2004 would probably be my last opportunity to chaperone a group of students to that wonderful camp and I would lose the fantastic experience of working very closely with a group of parents on a very worthwhile project. I had decided that I would no longer be able to be co-chair of the Ottawa chapter of VIEWS not because I believe that VIEWS is not valuable, but because fundamentally I believe that a parent not a teacher must be the chair of a parent advocacy/support organization.

Advocacy is not a “dirty” word! In fact, if parents are not prepared to present to the decision-makers of the day what is important to them and their children, who will do it? Bill 82 (1982) stated that parents have a right to receive service for their children with special needs in a their local Boards, but, politicians and administrators can learn about the special needs of children with disabilities only through effective advocacy from parents. Bill 82 stated that each Board in the province would have a Special Education Advisory Committee with representatives from registered advocacy groups representing children with various disabilities. Representation on SEAC has always been one of the primary reasons for VIEWS to exist! (The charter also mandates that VIEWS parents will organize conferences and education for parents and educators so that the needs of children who are vision impaired can be served.)

As I come nearer to the end of my career as a vision teacher I have had occasion to reflect on my years of teaching children with vision impairments. Throughout that time, I realize how important VIEWS had been. In January 1981, the superintendent of Special Education in the former Carleton Board asked me to come to his office so that he could inform me that my E.A. assignment had been changed. I would now be working with a young boy in grade two who was “acting out”. I soon discovered that he was acting out because he was quickly going blind and was receiving little support to meet his needs! An instructor from CNIB had been introducing him to Braille once per week, but she then retired and there was no one to replace her. I decided to learn Braille so that I could help my student, but I was only one chapter ahead of him in the book! (This is not the recommended method of teaching Braille!) My first student has since passed away, but I will always be grateful to him for providing me with the call to change the direction of my life! Certainly people from CNIB and others advocated to the School Board for changes to the service to blind and vision impaired students, but a strong parent advocacy group made major changes possible! In the summer of 1982, I was able to attend the first summer program to train specialist teachers of the blind to be itinerant teachers. (As an EA, I was not eligible for the program but I had my teaching certificate from Newfoundland.) Before 1982, there were no programs in any Board in Ontario (except Toronto) that provided service to children who were blind. A residential placement in Brantford was the only option for parents. The change that created local Board programs was made because of strong advocacy from parents who were determined to keep their children at home! Dorothy, my first student's mother, became the first VIEWS representative on the Carleton Board's SEAC in spite of the fact that she had a full time job and she had many duties at home because both of her children were quickly becoming blind. Ellen Goodman became the first ITVI in Ottawa in 1983.

In Ottawa, Colleen Hendrick has been representing VIEWS on SEAC for twelve years! More than once, during delicate budget deliberations, she has effectively promoted the Ottawa-Carleton Education Program for Students who are Visually Impaired. I believe Colleen is well respected on SEAC because

she appreciates the role of administrators and knows that they can only make prudent decisions if parents present their concerns in reasonable and detailed proposals. Once again it is important to realize that we (parents and educators) cannot expect administrators to be able to make prudent decisions for us unless we are willing to be strong advocates! In my opinion, administrators have too many areas of responsibility to be fully informed about every issue and must rely on the knowledge of parents who are more closely involved with the day-to-day issues affecting the lives of their children with special needs. We have been very fortunate to have Colleen on SEAC for so many years, but her son graduated last year and she has made a commitment to stay on SEAC until June 2005. Who will take Colleen's place on the public Board's SEAC? What about representation on OCCSB and the other School Boards in the region?

In Toronto, Vera Malec and others were strong advocates for students with visual impairments. I was privileged to be able to teach Vera's daughter in the Dufferin-Peel Board from 1983 to 1985 and know how many volunteer hours she expended! Her advocacy with the Dufferin-Peel School Board led to the creation of the first ITVI position in the Board. I believe she was on the first VIEWS Board in the early 1980's. Even after her husband passed away suddenly at an early age, she continued to work hard to help establish local chapters of VIEWS in many parts of the province so that there would be effective advocacy on the various SEACs on School Boards. When VIEWS was given a Trillium grant, Vera became the first (and only) paid Secretary-Treasurer and continued to promote effective representation and advocacy for the needs of our students to those who make the decisions. I have a great deal of respect for her and that first VIEWS board! Unfortunately, when the Trillium grant ran out, VIEWS could no longer afford a paid position and soon after, most chapters in the province became dormant. I am thankful that there has been a re-birth of VIEWS recently but without more parental involvement, it seems that the organization cannot continue to exist!

At this time, Ellen Goodman represents vision concerns on the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education. Although Ellen contributes countless volunteer hours working on that council, to bring forward the concerns of parents regarding the educational needs of their vision impaired children, she needs the formal advocacy of VIEWS' members to show our provincial politicians and Ministry of Education staff these are the views of tax-paying and voting parents! Later, in Spring 2005 there is a Vision Educators' conference in Halifax. The Expanded Core Curriculum will be the focus of the conference. If the Expanded Core Curriculum were to be mandated throughout Canada, there would be major advances in the field of education to students who are vision impaired. Such an initiative requires further parental advocacy! In Ontario, the Ministry of Education has spoken about standards for the education of children with various disabilities. Will that soon happen? Another issue that looms in the province of Ontario is the shortage of teacher education in our field. In a few short years, many of the present Vision teachers will retire and there are few qualified teachers to take our places! What will happen to the education of a young child who has a vision impairment now entering the system?

It seems to me that there could be two main motivations for parents to get involved with VIEWS now.

1. Some parents may appreciate the service their child is presently receiving and are grateful for the efforts of the VIEWS parents who have preceded them. This gratitude may motivate some to continue the efforts to maintain services, for others, to address inadequacies (like pre-school services in some areas) for others.
2. Some parents may be fearful that the needs of their own child are not being met or will not be met in the future. There are many issues from the looming teacher shortage, implementation of the Expanded Core Curriculum, pre-school service and others. These concerns may motivate them to get involved and

make their concerns known to the politicians and administrators of today.

There are certainly some “perks” that are available to those parents who are willing to be involved. Initiatives such as Space Camp or Congregated events (such as the Lake Joseph trip and others) are possible only through close partnerships of teachers and parents. In fact, I believe that a close parent-teacher partnership is what makes teaching much more satisfying, and, especially for children with special needs, much more effective!

Even though I will no longer be co-president of VIEWS (Ottawa) I still wish to work in close partnership with parents and with VIEWS (if it still exists) for the sake of our children and students. I am excited about what we are able to do together, but also am very concerned by the lack of those opportunities without the needed partnership.