October 29, 2010

Madame Minister:

The Advisory Board on English Language Education appreciated the opportunity to attend the "meeting of the partners," in Quebec City, albeit as an observer, and to profit from the exchange of information and opinion. The Board recognized many similarities with the situation regarding inclusion in the Francophone sector, such as the problems encountered in disadvantaged schools in the Greater Montreal area, but also notes important differences: for example, the graduation rate in English schools is higher, despite the greater inclusion rate of children with special needs; limiting the number of special needs children in a class is unworkable in 70% of English schools because they are too small for to justify closed classes and already, inclusion is a fact of life; and the greater difficulties of obtaining support from social services in the regions, where one school may be associated with three or more CLSCs, each with its own policies, priorities and financial limitations.

The Board continues to maintain the views it expressed in its November 2006 advisory report, "Issues of inclusion and integration in the classroom," and elaborated on these views in its two latest meetings. We take the opportunity to answer the three framing questions posed in the Minister's reflection paper under the headings of the following four principles.

1. Attitude

Inclusion means accepting differences and providing all children equitable opportunities to succeed. The goal is not to "fix" the child with special needs, but to normalize the

educational experience for the child as much as possible. It is the view of the Board that success is better defined by whether young people with special needs may be integrated into society, rather than whether they are successful in school. We measure the progress of the child towards achieving the competency.

2. Support

All partners who have responsibility for the child need training and support. Pre-service teachers need more preparation in inclusion. This has implications for universities, cooperating teachers and the organization of the student teaching practicum. In-service teachers, administrators and professionals need continuing education and retraining, including teaching practices appropriate to the needs of the individual child (such as differentiated instruction), and they should be acknowledged for taking this training. Pre-school and daycare educators need careful training, particularly in identifying problems among young children. More education and support for families, including respite and help from social services, would help the mission of serving each child according to his needs and the family's needs. The school's work must be supported by well-trained and easily accessible community resources. The transition from school to society needs partnerships with local businesses and industries. Any successful model of inclusion is expensive and must be well-supported financially.

3. Coordination

Long-term planning for educating the child with special needs involves a coordinated effort by all the partners in the child's development from infancy through the various transitions to a productive life in the community. Early identification of developmental delays or behavioural difficulties must be done in daycare, or by primary health care

providers, which research has shown to be valuable. In the words of the keynote speaker: “You pay now or you pay later.” There needs to be a better coordinated system between pre-K and schools and the MELS/MSSS entente urgently needs to be reexamined for the English sector.

4. Flexibility

Strategies for children with special needs must be based on the needs of each child. While a provincial policy is useful in broad terms, it will encourage a tendency to consider all children with special needs as an entity. One size does not fit all, and there must be room for accommodation of individual differences as well as for local variation. Differentiated instruction must be encouraged and teachers provided with appropriately adapted materials. The budgetary rules are out of step with a needs-based model of education and should be simplified, without sacrificing accountability. School boards are using resources that would normally be designated to ‘regular’ students to fulfill the needs of the students with special needs and should be allowed flexibility in budgeting at the local level.

In closing, we would like to take this opportunity to commend you for having taken this initiative and for agreeing to study inclusive education further with a view to issuing new guidelines and other means of support. The Board looks forward to participating fully in other partner meetings scheduled for later in the year.