

Opinion Editorial

Ontario's Child and Youth Advocate wants to hear from young people with special needs

By Irwin Elman, Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

"I used to think that school should be a mirror of what society could be," said the young woman with resignation, "but I found it to be a mirror of what society is." This is what I heard recently from a young woman with a disability, who is struggling with her health and yet seeking an opportunity to make things different for children like herself. Hers, is a voice that is seldom heard in our province.

Ontario has initiatives, strategies, plans, frameworks and policies created by ministry after ministry to develop and provide services and supports for children and youth with special needs and their families. In our school systems alone, a quagmire of policies and processes exist, enough to make many parents and children feel they are in quicksand, ostensibly supporting children like the girl I met.

One thing that Ontarians should know, however, is that despite the best of intentions, there is an astounding gap – a chasm – between the province's well intentioned plans and the lived experience of children and youth with special needs.

We can do better and our children and youth can help us. Their voice and wisdom can fill the chasm. Their voice can facilitate fundamental change.

My Office recently launched, *I Have Something to Say*, an initiative aimed at engaging children and youth with special needs in a discussion about their lives and their future. We know that they have something to say, which is why we are asking them to tell us, and the province, what we can do to make a difference for them. They can do this in any way they feel comfortable – using art, music, social media, stories, letters or video. There are no limits.

We know that some children will need assistance. We invite anyone who can help elevate the voice of a child or youth to make a submission to *I Have Something to Say*. We also encourage parents, caregivers, siblings, professionals and service providers to share their own stories.

The mandate of my Office is to partner with children and youth to ensure their voice is heard. We know when children and youth speak, they become visible to all of us. We have learned that they benefit from the experience, as do our communities. We know that they can move mountains. It is well past time Ontario, let's move the mountain with them.

For more information about *I Have Something to Say*, please visit the Provincial Advocate's website at www.provincialadvocate.on.ca or connect with him on social media @OntarioAdvocate and www.facebook.com/ihsts.