

On to college

B.C. parents look to Alberta for inspiration on how to enrol their disabled children in universities » by TERRY O'NEILL

The two Vancouver mothers nod knowingly as they compare notes about their 16-year-old daughters. Barb Stevenson says her daughter, Mary, has a wicked sense of humour and hopes to work in the healthcare field. Barb Laird confides that if her girl, Melanie, had a motto, it would be "don't hold me back." Melanie's goal, her proud mom says, is to be a singer.

Two moms, two daughters and four hearts full of shared dreams. But can the dreams ever come true? The question is especially pointed because both Mary and Melanie were born with Down's syndrome, which left them with a host of developmental disabilities and, for Mary especially, several physical problems as well. Yet, like thousands of other disabled children across Canada, the two girls have attended elementary and high school as part of the great "mainstreaming" experiment of the past generation.

Now, their mothers are hoping they and a small number of other developmentally disabled students can attend university too, not so much for the rigorous academic training a university is said to offer, but for its social benefits. "This is about more than going to class and getting marks," says Mrs. Laird. "It's about growing, maturing and connecting with others."

The two women have formed the Steps Forward Inclusive Post-Secondary Education Society* to help them reach their goal. They must not only raise about \$200,000 a year to pay for facilitators, but must also raise awareness about what children such as theirs can accomplish in and contribute to a university.

Many Canadian community colleges already offer special vocational programs for developmentally disabled students, but Mrs. Stevenson points out that the students are often isolated. In 1987, the University of Alberta became the first university in Canada to offer inclusive post-secondary courses. Today, similar programs are offered at the University of



Mothers Stevenson (left) and Laird (inset, Melanie Laird): About socializing, not education.

Calgary and two Alberta colleges. As well, courses are also available in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.

The program Mrs. Laird envisions for B.C. would see no more than a dozen students auditing perhaps one or two courses at a time at a single university. Those who complete four years would not qualify for a degree, but might be recognized at convocation and given some sort of certificate. B.C.'s new minister of advanced education, Shirley Bond, declines to be interviewed on the subject, leaving questions of funding and educational philosophy unanswered.

Still, the proposal raises a number of questions. "A university is not a daycare

centre," points out Peter Suedfeld, a professor of psychology at the University of B.C. and a director of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship. On the other hand, if the students are carefully selected to ensure they will not disrupt a class, he cannot see the harm in allowing them in. But then there is also the question of space; qualified students are already being turned away from overflowing classes.

Of like mind is Keith Cassidy, a professor of history at the University of Guelph. "Insofar as this would not have an impact on course content and the level of delivery, I don't think you could object to somebody auditing a course," he says.

"The danger would be if it became, over time, an unspoken assumption that the course would be modified to make it more accessible." The professor understands that parents of Down's syndrome children want their children to experience all of life, but "you don't want the integration to be in a way that gives your child a false sense of expectations."

That, in turn, leads to questions about the function of a university. If it is now to be an institution that helps socialize students, then taxpayers should be made aware of that.

Furthermore, Prof. Cassidy says that if developmentally disabled students can lay claim to this socializing function, then so might other students who failed to gain admission simply because of low marks.

Also worth considering, says Prof.

Suedfeld, is the assumption that devel-

opmentally disabled students will enjoy auditing difficult university-level courses. "My personal prediction is, that after these young people sit through one or two classes, they won't want to keep going," he says. "I think the parents are being very optimistic. It's not that much fun sitting and listening to a lecture for an hour on something you don't really understand." ■

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COURTESY OF THE LAIRD FAMILY