

# Not-So-Special Education

*Here is from-the-heart testimony about the impact of poor teaching on students' lives.  
Spelling and grammar have been corrected.*

## by Sarah Schneider

I was in special education all through elementary school. I have always had low self-esteem and hated being me.

When I look back at my elementary days, I remember hating every minute. I spent most of my day outside the regular classroom and I felt left out. I felt very depressed and even suicidal.

Grade 6 was my worst year. I had a very bad teacher who used to humiliate me in front of the class. I remember thinking how much I hated my home town and wanted to leave. I remember how shocked I was when I won a shop award at my grade 8 graduation.

In grade 9 I took all general courses but I could not keep up. I was sent to a program where I learned job skills and was placed in a job over the summer. I started hanging out with the wrong crowd that summer.

In grade 10 I was back in special education at my home high school and I started to skip classes. I got into a fight one day and was suspended for three days. The principal told me that I was the problem and that I couldn't come back to his school.

After my dad had a big meeting at the school board, it was decided it would be in my best interests to go to a special program for troubled adolescents.

At my new school, we had work stations and smoke breaks. I was 15 years old, and I was smoking and drinking, depressed and fighting with everyone.

After a couple of months, I was passed on to a vocational high school where I felt at home at last. There I met my common-law husband.

On my parents' wedding anniversary, I ran away after school. I left a good home without knowing why. My parents tried everything to get me back home. I slept on the streets, in hallways, storage units, and basements. I was eventually arrested and sent home where I did not stay long.

Soon, I took part in a robbery and was on the run again. On my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, I turned myself in. During the next year, while my case went through the courts, I moved in with my boyfriend and two other special education kids.

All this time, my parents were begging me to come home. I don't know why I never did.

After one year, my court case came up and I was sentenced to six months at a special jail for teenagers. Within two weeks of my release, I was pregnant.

My daughter is now eight years old, and she is having problems at school. When she was in kindergarten, the teachers wanted to put her into special education. I fought them. In grade 1, all I heard was special education. In grade 2, she went into special education, but it does not seem to be helping her. I don't want my bright, sweet kid to feel upset, depressed, or stupid.

This is what special education has done for me.

## by Linda Schneider

The school system has had a devastating effect on my daughter — her happiness, her development, her effectiveness, her self-realization.

Every mother sends her small, vulnerable children to school expecting them to be treated with respect and taught how to read, write, do math, and more. Yet Sarah was physically removed from the other children, making her feel too stupid to be with the normal kids, and sent to another room where she still didn't learn. At least, she didn't learn things like reading and writing, but she sure learned that she was a failure.

I tried everything I could think of to solve the problems that Sarah was experiencing. Every grade, there were endless meetings, testing sessions, conferences, and consultations. For example, when Sarah was in grade 4, she was tested by a psychologist who spent a half hour with her and then wrote a five-page report about how manipulative she was.

Despite — or because of? — the educators' best efforts, by the age of 14 Sarah was skipping school all the time, and after a while she ran away from home. The police finally found her "sleeping with known criminals" in the doorway of an apartment building. It was February.

The police brought her back home, but she would not stay, no matter how much her dad and I pleaded. The school system, while unable to teach Sarah to read, write, spell, or do math, did teach her to lie, steal, feel worthless, run away, learn what humiliation feels like, and feel alienated from normal people.

Soon she was skipping school again and back on the streets with other street kids. Sometimes, they would make up stories of abuse at home when they asked to be allowed to stay a few nights at someone's home. I found this out when a former neighbour phoned me and said that Sarah had showed up at her house with no socks on.

Then Sarah was arrested with three other street kids trying to steal cigarettes from a convenience store (one of the other girls had a knife). When I next saw her, her long blond hair had been shaved and what was left had been dyed black in an attempt to disguise herself from the police.

My daughter's partner has had a similar education — or should I say non-education. They have both had factory jobs where the work generally abuses the physical body in some way. They are now 26 years old.

During the past ten years, they have endured debt, poor decision-making, credit card misuse — and parental rescue, which is difficult to stop because of my granddaughter. Both my daughter and her husband are devoted to their daughter, but they don't have the skills or the tools for life management, and so everything snowballs.

Because I assumed that the professionals knew what they were doing, I simply trusted them. I was wrong.