

Our fifth principle, to make a gradual transition from school to work, was developed when we realized that our son could learn a skill in one setting but could not necessarily perform that same skill in another setting. This is called "low skill transference ability" in jargon. We saw that sheltered workshops — in which people with mental handicaps are supposedly trained for jobs in the real world — are almost total failures.

Our local school board was one step ahead of us and had set up a work-study program for its pupils with a mental handicap. Work-study programs are vital if our children with mental handicaps are to have a decent life. They cannot learn about the real world of work while in school; they need opportunities to learn how to work in the workplace itself. Segregated schooling leading to segregated sheltered workshops creates lives of dependency, frustration, anguish and desperation in institutions. Children with handicaps deserve much more than that.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN PARENT PRINCIPLES AND SYSTEM ASSUMPTIONS

It is important to point out that our principles challenge a number of basic assumptions about the way schools operate. Although most of the teachers and administrators who had direct responsibility for our son's education had appropriate and sometimes phenomenal attitudes, we found major problems at the system and structural levels. We were led to think about these problems by system failures and the experiences of other parents. In fact, our principles raise a fundamental question that we thought had been resolved long ago: are all pupils to be given a chance or are some, as George Orwell said, "more equal than others"? There are educators who still believe there should be gatekeepers armed with "objective assessments" to keep pupils with a mental handicap separate from friends and peers. We also know principals,