

**Response to the Minister's Review of Services
for Students with Special Needs**

December 2007

Nova Scotia Department of Education

Response to the Minister's Review of Services for Students with Special Needs

Recommendations

1.0 The Department of Education reaffirm its commitment to and support of inclusive education in the next update of the *Special Education Policy Manual*.

There was strong and pervasive support for inclusive education across the province as there was in response to the Special Education Review in 2001. Many organizations and agencies noted the need for increased resources to support students with special needs in an inclusive education system.

The Department of Education continues to be committed to an inclusive education system and is currently updating the *Special Education Policy* to reflect recent regulatory, policy and program changes. This commitment to inclusive education is further elaborated upon in the Fact Sheet *Inclusion: Supporting All Students*.

2.0 The Department of Education appoint a provincial Learning Disabilities Consultant by the fall of 2008.

The Department of Education recognizes the need for enhanced supports for students with Learning Disabilities and will engage a provincial learning disabilities consultant in the fall of 2008.

2.1 The Department of Education develop and implement a provincial Learning Disabilities Strategy in the 2008–2009 school year.

The Department of Education recognizes the need for enhanced supports for students with Learning Disabilities and will develop a provincial learning disabilities strategy led by the provincial learning disabilities consultant beginning in the fall of 2008. Once developed, the strategy will be implemented as budget comes available.

3.0 The Minister of Education and government announce the end of the Tuition Support Program effective June 30, 2010.

This recommendation, was not supported by a group of parents of students currently enrolled in the Designated Special Education Private Schools (DSEPS) but was supported by school boards and other public education organizations. Some public education organizations also noted that if the Tuition Support Program was to be discontinued, that there would need to be an enhancement to services for students with learning disabilities at the Department of Education and in the school boards.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia (LDANS), which represents parents of students with learning disabilities across the province, called for a review of the Tuition Support Program. The association recommends that the review focus on:

- long term effectiveness of the program
- duration of placement
- research based interventions and instructional methods utilized
- transitional outcomes for students receiving the service
- regional accessibility and criteria for acceptance to determine if the “program is truly an effective and equitable method to support the implementation of the Special Education Policy for Nova Scotian students with Learning Disabilities.”

The Special Education Programs and Services (SEPS) Committee will be charged with reviewing the Tuition Support program utilizing the elements above. This review will take place over the 2008–2009 school year. Parents of students who are currently attending DSEPS will be consulted as well as other education stakeholders to determine what additional supports would be necessary to provide the desirable level of service, not only in areas served by DSEPS, but also in other areas across Nova Scotia. A report will be submitted to the Minister of Education by June, 2009.

In the meantime, the Tuition Support Program will continue under the current guidelines. The Minister will extend the Program for Learning Assessment for Nova Scotia (PLANS) to include students in the DSEPS granting the Nova Scotia High School Graduation Diploma starting in September, 2008. PLANS includes:

- provincial assessments
 - Math and Language Arts at grades 3, 6, and 9
 - Nova Scotia Examinations (NSE) at grade 12 in Math and Language Arts
- national assessments
 - Science, Reading and Math
 - Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (13 year olds)
- international assessments
 - Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) - 15 year olds
 - Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) - grade 4

Policies and procedures with regard to PLANS relate to those for adaptations, exemptions, and eligibility, as well as, the administering, scoring and reporting of assessment results.

This will ensure that the progress of students who attend these schools is being evaluated on the same basis as the progress of students attending public school in Nova Scotia and will provide accountability for the issuing of the High School Graduation Diploma. To assist in ensuring that parents understand their child’s progress, the Provincial Individual Program Plan (IPP) Report Card will be used for students attending DSEPS under the Tuition Support Program and will be fully implemented across public schools, in the fall of 2008.

3.1 The Minister of Education redirect all funds (tuition funding unit and supplement, administrative costs) currently allocated for the Tuition Support Program to school boards to assist in their efforts to offer effective programs and supports to students with learning disabilities.

The outcome of the above review will determine the course of action regarding these two recommendations. Increased support for core professional services as outlined in Learning for Life II will continue to enhance the capability of school boards to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.

3.2 The Minister of Education enhance the resources and supports presently in place for the Severe Learning Disabilities (SLD) Program to ensure that all student requiring this program have access.

The provincial Learning Disabilities Consultant, in conjunction with the provincial SLD committee and school board staff will review resources and supports for this program and will assist the department and school boards to enhance the capability of school boards to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.

4.0 The Department of Education do a board-by-board audit of the role and assignment of teacher assistants.

The Department of Education will review and update *Teacher Assistant Guidelines* (1998). The Department will work with school boards to develop a framework for the evaluation of teacher assistant assignments, as well as guidelines for the allocation and monitoring of teacher assistant utilization.

5.0 The principles of differentiated instruction form an integral part of the creation, presentation, and professional development of all curriculum and teaching/learning materials.

The Department of Education will continue to collaborate across divisions and areas of expertise throughout the curriculum development and implementation process. Divisions within the Department will continue to collaborate to ensure curriculum documents reflect an emphasis on differentiated instruction and assessment so that teachers can plan learning environments, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and resource selection to respond to the diverse learners in today's classrooms.

6.0 School boards be encouraged to develop a process to facilitate the loan of assistive technology devices surplus to their present needs.

The Department of Education, in partnership with school boards, has developed *Assistive Technology: Supporting Student Success* as a guide to support the development, implementation, and evaluation of programming for students with special needs when the use of assistive technology is involved. A Network Learning Community is being set up to explore collaborative needs planning, bulk purchasing, professional development and

shared use of resources. At the present time, there is no surplus of assistive technology software and devices in the school boards. However, with the current base funding of \$700,000.00, this will build up an inventory whereby boards can explore a shared loan system particularly in relation to assistive technology equipment which may be of high cost but low utilization.

7.0 The Department of Education review and update the list of Authorized Learning Resources to ensure access to appropriate multi-level and life skills resources at the secondary level.

The staff of the Student Services Division will continue to participate in the Authorized Learning Resources (ALR) review process on a weekly basis. The Student Services Division will focus on identifying additional materials and resources to support the teaching of life skills for students with special needs. A percentage allocation of the current ALR funding will be apportioned and targeted for materials and resources for students with special needs.

8.0 The Department of Education investigate with Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP) the feasibility of accessing services/materials from French language school boards in New Brunswick and/or Prince Edward Island via the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA) structure.

The Department of Education, through a collaboration between the Student Services Division of the Public Schools Branch and the Acadian and French Language Services Branch will discuss this issue with the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial to try and establish which, if any, of the services and materials it would be feasible to access via interprovincial cooperation and collaboration.

9.0 The delivery model and core service ratios for student services staff be based on identified needs, travel realities, and the number of schools served.

The Department of Education has invested \$9.3 million (2004–2007) to address the core professional services ratios recommended by the Special Education Review Implementation Review (SEIR) (2001). This has been a significant investment in core professional services supporting students with special needs. The Department will work with school boards to identify areas of concern in response to the ratios recommended by the review committee, priorities for service, and to develop an action plan to consider differentiated ratios in relation to distance traveled, number of schools served, and other issues related to identified areas of need.

10.0 School boards protect the allocation of the resource/learning centre teachers and provide at a minimum 0.5 (FTE) units per school.

Resource positions are part of core professional services. These positions require specified qualifications and competencies as outlined in *Supporting Student Success: Resource Programming and Services*. The Department strongly supports and encourages boards in the use of staffing strategies which support 0.5 FTE Resource or above

recognizing the challenges that small student enrolments present in the implementation of this recommendation. School boards will be required to report annually, by school, on the progress of the implementation of this recommendation.

11.0 The government Departments of Education and Finance commit to the establishment of and funding for a province-wide student information system consistent with the demands of public schools.

The Department of Education is committed to the provision of student data necessary for effective and appropriate programming and reporting of student progress. To this end the Department of Education is committed to establishing and implementing a comprehensive and cost effective student information system. The department is conducting a review of products in the marketplace and is very close to determining an appropriate product that can meet the criteria established by the school boards and the department for a comprehensive student information system. Submissions have been made to the Business Technology Advisory Committee, a committee of Deputy Ministers, which ascertains priorities for new technology projects and enhancements to new technology across government.

Schools using the provincial student report card should be also using the reporting template for reporting on individualized outcomes developed for a student on an individual program plan (IPP).

12.0 The Minister request that the Auditor General review the service delivery model for speech-language pathology to determine if the maximum effectiveness is being achieved.

The Department of Education supports the provision of speech language pathology services to students requiring this service from primary to grade 12. The Department is committed to the provision of support based on a timely and on site team approach that is consistent with the goals of the public school program. Speech-language pathology services in schools support the development and implementation of educational programming for individual students. Speech-language pathologists working in the public school system require an in-depth knowledge of student needs in the context of their school programs and settings. The Department of Education has supported the enhancement of speech-language pathology as a core professional service. We will work with our partners to identify those services which need to be available to school aged children and youth to address gaps in speech-language pathology services. Collaboration between education and health will be a component of Schools Plus pilots currently being developed under the Child and Youth Strategy.

13.0 The Department of Education target funding for the staffing of guidance counsellors in all elementary schools to support students in the four areas of comprehensive guidance and counselling.

The Department of Education supports this recommendation and has focused on this through Learning for Life funding. The recommended ratio of Guidance Counsellors to students (1:500) in the Comprehensive Guidance & Counselling Program will continue to

be a target for the provision of qualified guidance counsellors to public schools. As a result of Principals in Focus 2006, Learning for Life II funding supported inclusion of guidance counsellor ratios in core professional services and we will continue to address this ratio as Learning for Life funding comes available. In 2006–2007, the guidance ratio was 1:806.

14.0 The Department of Education review and endorse the recommendations related to transition as contained in the 2006 report of the Provincial Transition Committee (a sub-committee of CAYAC).

An ad hoc committee set up by the Child and Youth Action Committee (CAYAC) met its mandate to develop a transition guide and recommend strategies to support transition planning. The committee recommended to the Child and Youth Social Policy Committee (CYSPC) that a provincial transition committee be established co-chaired by the Departments of Education and Community Services. A second transition support program (in addition to ACEE) is in place in Port Hawkesbury (Strait to Work) with two more programs in the planning stages for the Valley and South Shore. A framework for further development has been created to use in establishing programming in this area.

15.0 School boards have, within their staffing complement, a specific position(s) to support school personnel in the development of transition planning in individual program plans, which can be tracked, monitored, and evaluated.

There are currently two transition specialists in place in school boards to support transition from school to community: Halifax Regional School Board and Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board. Additionally, \$200,000 is provided annually to boards on a per capita basis to assist with transitioning students with Autism and other developmental challenges from home to school.

If the ratio of Student Services Coordinators/Administration can be reduced from 1:7000 to 1:3500 this recommendation can be further supported. As we meet our ratio for core professional services, we will revisit this ratio to address possible additional support.

16.0 Government through the Departments of Education and Community Services collaborate to ensure that students with special needs have access and support for post-school learning options.

In addition to the response to recommendation 14, the Departments of Education and Community Services will collaborate through the Services for Persons with Disabilities Strategy on the establishment of pre-vocational programs for young adults with special needs exiting the public school system.

17.0 The Department of Education review the course options available to enable students with special needs to graduate with the skills necessary to be lifelong learners and contributing community members.

The Department of Education currently has in place a committee that is developing programming options in the area of life skills for students with special needs and will

review and assess the effectiveness of existing programs such as the Occupational Preparation Program (OPP) and Career Access. The committee of Department and representative board staff will:

- establish a statement of beliefs around functional life skills for secondary students
- explore how these beliefs can be incorporated into grade 10–12 programs
- identify professional strategies and resources
- recommend a long term professional development framework for functional life skills curriculum

18.0 The Department of Education, through its participation in the Child and Youth Social Policy Committee, continue its promotion of substantive inter-agency collaboration that works towards integrated services (IS) schools, as well as addressing the recommendations of the Nunn Commission.

The Department agrees with this recommendation and will be working with the Child & Youth Social Policy Committee partners to implement four Schools Plus pilots in integrated services in 2008. These will be established in the Metro area, Amherst and the South Shore. In addition, we will collaborate with the Departments of Community Services and Health as the Department of Community Services implements wrap around services in Pictou, Colchester and Yarmouth Counties and in Halifax Regional Municipality.

19.0 The Department of Education continue to provide targeted funding to school boards to host annual information sessions (at the family of school/school level) open to all education partners to highlight and clarify *The Program Planning Process: A Guide for Parents* and various fact sheets.

Targeted funding of \$125,000 has been provided to assist boards with implementation of *The Program Planning Process: A Guide for Parents*. This is the third year that the Department has sent fact sheets to all boards to be distributed to parents of students in grade primary. In addition, folders of these fact sheets are provided to boards on request. This distribution of fact sheets has been worthwhile as parents are more informed about collaborative program planning. School boards have access to special education policy implementation funding which can also be used to support an understanding of the program planning process.

20.0 The Department of Education continue targeted funding to school boards to:

- **support current best practices related to both informal and standardized comprehensive individualized assessment at the school level**
- **include provision of appropriate assessment materials to all schools**
- **provide professional development necessary to all resource/learning centre teachers**

The Department, in collaboration with boards, will be releasing guidelines for the provision of speech language pathology and school psychology services over the next school year. The release of these guides in 2008–2009 will provide clarification on the

provision of appropriate programming and services including assessment. These documents together with the enhanced ratios provided through Learning for Life II will address concerns related to timelines and programming interventions.

- 21.0 The Minister of Education restrict all or part of the Innovation Challenge Fund to be a dedicated provincial fund to which school boards may apply for financial support to undertake initiatives identified as “priority pilots” by the department. The committee recommends that one immediate priority pilot be the implementation of co-teaching.**

The Innovation Challenge Fund of 1.9 million dollars is being utilized by school boards in funding priority pilots in areas such as supporting students with behavioral needs, effective transitioning for students with special needs, co-teaching and programming for students with gifts and talents. Should school boards decide to re-direct funds from the current pilots, they are required to submit an application for approval to the Department of Education addressing criteria established by the Department for utilization of the funds.

- 22.0 The Minister of Education place a high priority on the retention and enhancement of funds in support of students with special needs as presently allocated in the Learning for Life documents, the Innovation Challenge Fund, and the Increasing Learning Success initiative.**

The department will continue to advocate for funding to ensure continued enhancements and support for our system. The department will work with its partners to examine ways to collaborate to address student needs at the school level. In particular, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and mental health services will be explored in the context of the Schools Plus pilots over the next school year.

- 23.0 The Minister of Education inform government of the need to establish a capital fund to guarantee barrier-free access to public school buildings.**

All new schools are barrier free in accordance with the Education Act. The Department has designed a survey to support remaining schools in the identification of the amount required for capital budgeting in the next fiscal year. The results of this survey will provide information upon which to build an action plan.

- 23.1 All learners have reasonable access to extra-curricular and co-curricular activities offered by schools to include appropriate transportation and other reasonable supports that promote participation.**

The Department of Education supports and encourages boards to provide universal accessibility to co-curricular activities. The Department will work with boards to explore enhanced opportunities for all students to participate in extra curricular programming.

Regarding private conveyance of students with special needs, the Facilities Management Division of the Department of Education, in consultation with the school boards and the

Division of Student Services, will undertake a review and update of the *Handbook for Transportation of Students with Special Needs* (1999).

24.0 The Department of Education work in collaboration with all school boards, the NSTU, and university faculties of education to generate specific strategies and incentives to encourage interested teachers to enrol in graduate education programs to pursue careers as resource/learning centre teachers, guidance counsellors, speech-language pathologists, and/or school psychologists.

The Department of Education has worked closely with boards and universities to develop and deliver graduate level courses to enhance resource teachers competencies and qualifications. These cohorts are available throughout the province through Mount Saint Vincent University and St. Francis Xavier for resource in both English and French Immersion and Acadia University for Guidance and Counselling.

The Department will explore, with their university partners, possibilities of similar cohorts in the areas of speech language pathology and school psychology. In addition, we will work with school boards and the universities to increase opportunities for school-based practica for graduate students.

24.1 The Department of Education work co-operatively with the Nova Scotia school boards and in consultation with the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training (CAMET) to explore the possibility of an interprovincial protocol to facilitate and expedite the accreditation and certification of qualified candidates in speech-language pathology and school psychology who desire to transfer to Nova Scotia from another province or immigrate to Nova Scotia.

Candidates from other provinces can apply through Teacher Certification for credit recognition. In the period between graduation and professional registration the department provides school psychology graduates with a temporary certification to allow the hiring process to proceed. This enables boards to offer positions to new graduates and those who are applying to the Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia for registration in a timely manner.

In terms of immigrants to Nova Scotia, a new credential recognition system has just been developed to facilitate processing of the match between applicants' resumes and certification requirements. The Department of Immigration is establishing the criteria for credential recognition and immigrants will be able to apply through that process to expedite their certification in Nova Scotia.

25.0 The provincial teacher education review consider raising the teacher certification standard related to teaching students with special needs (to a minimum of 12 credit hours) so that a major emphasis is placed on issues, knowledge, skills, and attitudes around inclusive education and the instructional strategies required to meet the needs of diverse learners.

This recommendation has been referred to the Minister's Review Committee on Teacher Education.

26.0 School boards must provide ongoing professional development opportunities so that every teacher who has a probationary or permanent contract has the opportunity to participate in at least 10 hours of special education and/or inclusive schooling-related initiatives as part of the 100 contact hours completed by teachers through their personal professional development plan (every five-year cycle).

The Department of Education will work closely with boards to identify ongoing professional development opportunities focused on special education and/or inclusive schooling as a priority area. The Nova Scotia Educational Leadership Consortium has a module available on Inclusive Schooling which was developed in consultation with school boards and the Department of Education. The Department of Education is currently working on a professional development module on Developing, Implementing and Monitoring Individualized Program Plans which will be available to boards for their use in Spring, 2008.

27.0 School boards have, within their staffing complement, a specific position(s) to support school personnel in the development of appropriate programming and services in order to meet the various behavioural challenges of learners.

As the Department of Education achieves ratios in the current areas of core professional services, priority areas will become guidance and behaviour specialists thereby supporting school boards to include, within their staffing complement, behaviour specialists, in order to address various behavioural challenges.