



A Provincial Lifeline

Expanding the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program

Dr. Paul W. Bennett
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February 2012

Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

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A PROVINCIAL LIFELINE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Paul W. Bennett is a widely recognized leader in Canadian education, and the Lead Consultant at Schoolhouse Consulting, a Halifax-based consulting firm. From 1997 until 2009, Paul served as Headmaster of two of Canada's leading independent coeducational day schools, Halifax Grammar School and Lower Canada College.

For over thirty years, Paul taught History and Social Sciences in six different secondary schools, public as well as private, in three provinces, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. He is the author of three nationally recognized Canadian History textbooks, including *Canada: A North American Nation* (1988 and 1995), and has twice been a top ten finalist for the Governor General's Award for Teaching Excellence in Canadian History.

He has also played an active role in promoting educational reform. While serving as a Public School Trustee with the York Region Board of Education (1988-1997), Paul founded the Ontario School Board Reform Network (1990) and was a Co-founder of the Coalition for Education Reform, an umbrella group promoting higher standards and greater accountability in Ontario public education.

Since the founding of the Dominion Institute and the Historica Foundation, Paul has been a strong public advocate in defence of Canadian history in our schools. In 2008-09, he served on the National Advisory Committee for Dominion Institute's Canadian History Report Card project.

Paul is a regular news commentator, covering Canadian education, for *The Chronicle Herald*, *OpenFile Halifax*, *CBC Radio Nova Scotia*, *News 95.7*, and *Our Kids Magazine*. Over the past two years, his articles have appeared in both the popular and academic press, including *Progress Magazine*, the *RNSHS Journal*, and *Historical Studies in Education*. His first AIMS Commentary, "School's Out, Again: Why Throw-Away School Days Hurt Students" (April 2010), sparked public debate over the high incidence of snow days in Nova Scotia and neighboring Maritime provinces. Two of his most recent books are *The Grammar School: Striving for Excellence in a Public School World* (2009), and *Vanishing Schools, Threatened Communities: The Contested Schoolhouse in Maritime Canada, 1850-2010* (2011).

Currently, Paul also serves as an Adjunct Professor of Education at Saint Mary's University, Vice-Chair of the Halifax Public Library Board, and President of the Canadian International Council, Halifax Branch.

Executive Summary

Not long ago, a once struggling Nova Scotian student with Learning Disabilities now attending Dartmouth's Bridgeway Academy was asked how enrolling in a specialized, intensive school program has changed her life. She replied, in matter-of-fact fashion: "For the first time, I feel I belong." Now that is effective inclusion.

Somewhere between 2 % and 4% of Nova Scotia's public school students, numbering from 2,500 to 5,000, are struggling at school with serious learning challenges. The case has been well made elsewhere for the need to continue to enhance and expand our classroom supports for these children.

Cookie cutter approaches to educating P-12 students, however, can be a recipe for disaster, especially so for special needs kids. Not every child with special needs can succeed in a "regular" school, regardless of the supports we can make available to them. What we need is an effective, sustainable, continuum of education options, options that are suited to each individual child and family circumstance.

Recent best practice Learning Disabled education research, conducted by Calgary Learning Centre expert Anne Price in 2009 for the NS Education Department, supports a provincial service model offering a variety of learning support programs, including special placements in alternate school settings. Price and her associate Mary Cole clearly identify the limits of inclusion as a whole system approach and claim that "best practice is not dependent upon a particular model of service delivery."

Surveying a range of models on the continuum from most segregated to most inclusive, Price and Cole reach some significant conclusions: effective practice is more important than location; students with LD require more time to learn; explicit and intensive instruction is critical; certain instructional practices are much easier in some settings; and more research is needed to connect research with placement decisions. Instead of accepting the theory that inclusion is good for every LD student, the focus should be on determining "who learns what best where." In short, specialized schools should be recognized as one option in the full continuum of service.

Nova Scotia's Tuition Support Program (TSP) is a real breakthrough, providing a more diverse range of families with access to a vitally important, research-proven alternative school option. The TSP, initiated in September 2004, provides an option for students with special needs who cannot be served at their local public school.

The TSP provides funding which covers most of the tuition costs to attend one of the three designated special education private schools (DSEPS), Bridgeway Academy, Churchill Academy, both co-educational day schools in Dartmouth, or Landmark East, a co-educational boarding school in Wolfville (Bridgeway also has a satellite campus in Truro). A supplemental needs based fund is also available to cover the remaining tuition gap if necessary.

Providing tuition subsidies in the form of per student grants (or vouchers) has proven to be successful in meeting the unique special education needs of a hard-to-serve student population. Yet the sad reality is that, in today's Nova Scotia, only 165 out of the 124,500 students in the province's Primary to Grade 12 schools, and those confined to the Greater Halifax –Truro region, have tax-supported access to a school program like that offered at Bridgeway Academy.

Furthermore, the TSP was explicitly intended for short-term purposes and works on the assumption that students can eventually be successfully "transitioned" back into the regular system, another erroneous one-size fits all assumption.

Expanding the TSP is not a replacement for enhanced supports in “mainstream” classrooms, but a necessary complement to those enhancements. The TSP is a sustainable, low cost program that works for these LD kids, we know it, so let’s make it available province wide.

This research report calls for a robust provincial policy initiative that embraces the Bridgeway model as part of a fully supported continuum of effective education for special needs kids. It’s time to extend the TSP educational lifeline to hundreds of students, and particularly those outside the Greater Halifax - Truro region currently marginalized in the regular, underserviced classrooms.

Rescuing these special needs students and expanding the TSP should be a higher priority in the NDP government’s Kids & Learning First school reform agenda.

Why Nova Scotia's "Educational Lifeline" Program Needs to be Expanded

"Student success must be everyone's first priority."

"Every student needs opportunities to achieve his or her greatest potential, every student can achieve success, and all students need adequate time to learn."

-Statements from Executive Summary, Learning For Life II
(Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2005)

"For the first time, I feel I belong."

-Student at Bridgeway Academy
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

Good public policy originates, as it should, when serious private matters are raised to the level of public concerns. Education policy reform is no different. Personal family stories lie at the very heart of the movement to address and meet the needs of children facing severe learning challenges in the school system. Since the advent of Learning Disabilities education services in the early 1960s, reforms have been driven by concerned and often desperate parents seeking to rescue their own children and a small band of professionals determined to ensure that every child was given access to educational opportunities enabling them to live up to their true potential in life (Price and Cole, 2009). One such personal story is that of David Sampson of Halifax, the current president of the Equal Education Association of Nova Scotia (EEANS).

In May of her Grade 3 year, David Sampson's daughter was experiencing a personal crisis (Sampson Interview, 2011). Struggling in reading and mathematics, she began to stay home rather than face going to class at her local Primary to Grade 6 elementary school. She was full of anxieties and began to sink into childhood depression. David and his wife sought unsuccessfully to get a Psychological Assessment conducted by the Halifax Regional School Board in the hope of securing an LD designation and then an Individualized Program Plan (IPP), the recognized gateway to special education support services. Facing a two-year wait, they secured a private Psycho-Assessment for \$1,500 out of their own pockets to gain an LD diagnosis. After some 100 hours of private outside tutoring, their daughter was restored to her grade level in reading, but still very unhappy in her regular neighbourhood school.

David's daughter continued to struggle and the family began looking at one of the few alternatives available, Bridgeway Academy. That small Dartmouth private school founded in 1987 offered much needed hope, because it was dedicated exclusively to rescuing and enabling students with learning disabilities. It was a costly option with tuition fees of \$12,000 a year, well beyond the family's means, without some form of tuition support.

Nova Scotia's Tuition Support Program (TSP) looked like an answer to their family's prayers (NSDE, Tuition Support Program, 2011). That plan hit a knot when the home school principal turned down David's request for the required IPP papers, a condition required to access TSP funds. Seeing his daughter in crisis, David fought to get an appeal of the principal's ruling. Finally, back in the same principal's office, the decision was reversed and a letter was written albeit under some duress.

Fighting the good fight produced a happy ending for David and his daughter. Now, at the age of eleven and in Grade 6 at Bridgeway Academy, his daughter has a new lease on life with good marks and a solid group of friends. "Going through this struggle," David now says, "can be damaging to families. And the social costs of not doing the Tuition Support Program are huge."

David's daughter is far from alone in experiencing severe learning challenges that cannot be easily accommodated in the regular mainstream of the current public school system. A recent consultants report, produced in September 2011 for Bridgeway Academy (Barrington Consulting Group, 2011, 15), claims that 2% to 4% of Nova Scotia's total student population, or somewhere between 2,500 and 5,000 students are, like David's daughter, struggling special needs kids who would likely flourish in the type of environment provided by schools dedicated to educating students with learning disabilities. Furthermore, outside of the Halifax Regional Municipality and the province's central region, no schools of this type even exist.

The current reality is that hundreds of students in Nova Scotia's cities, towns and villages merely languish on the margins of the system, frequently missing classes and counting the days until they can quit school. A December 2009 Nova Scotia Department of Education report, prepared by Howard Windsor and examining 10 different high schools, provided the startling facts (Windsor, 2009). With 7.4% of students missing 20% or more of classes and 45% absent for 10% of their classes, it is already an entrenched and widespread problem. Turning out poorly motivated students and dead-ending others without many of the recognized "employability skills" does not bode well for the province's future.

Ignoring or neglecting children and teens with learning disabilities can and does have significant longer-term social costs. A few pieces of evidence, drawn from three decades of social science research, should suffice. Almost 50% of American adolescent suicides in the mid-1980s were teens previously diagnosed with learning disabilities. Some 35% of U.S. high school students with learning disabilities (in 1994) dropped out of high school, roughly twice the rate of regular students. Some 50% of females with learning disabilities were reported to become mothers within 3 to 5 months of leaving high school. A series of Canadian studies of young offenders have shown that between 30% and 70% of that population have experienced learning difficulties and the cost of detaining them in 1998 was estimated to be \$100,000 a year. Back in 1995, Correctional Services Canada reported that 45.6% of adult inmates with learning disabilities had previous youth court records. A recent Ontario Ministry of Labour study found that adults with learning disabilities typically hold a job for only three months and are most likely terminated for social skills deficits not lack of job skills (Warwick 2010).

Critical new questions are now being asked about the effectiveness of Nova Scotia's mainstream Special Education programs. In April 2011, Dr. Ben Levin's Education Review report tackled the question with a research-based analysis of Nova Scotia's current service delivery mix resting largely upon inclusion of special needs kids in regular classrooms. Since 2001, the proportion of students with Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) has doubled and, during a period of steady enrolment decline, special education enrolments have grown at a rate of 3 to 4 per cent a year." (Levin 2011, 11) He questioned whether the proliferation of special education had actually produced the expected gains in student achievement (Levin

2011, 28). Digging deeper, Levin identified three troubling issues: the amount of paperwork required for IPPs and its actual direct benefits for students' learning; the sheer numbers of students being 'identified' or 'placed' in relation to high performing countries like Finland; and the increasing reliance upon education assistants or teacher aides on a full- or part-time basis instead of regular teachers in inclusion-oriented classrooms.

While Levin's recent research literature review noted that special education produces small gains in achievement, he commented that such gains (under the current inclusive model) have not been weighed against "the additional costs of special education." (Levin 2011, 28) Most significantly, Levin called upon the province to re-assess whether Nova Scotia needed 2,000 education assistants with a student population of fewer than 130,000 students from P to 12. He strongly recommended that steps be taken to "reduce gradually the number of education assistants," and for school districts to consider re-allocating the resources to "help classroom teachers support a range of students," or to "provide intensive but short-term interventions for struggling students" with "the goal of getting them back to regular programs" in a matter of weeks not years. The bottom line, for Levin, was to ensure, if at all possible, that special needs students get as much time and attention from trained teachers and are given the best instruction enabling them to "return to 'regular' programs." (Levin 2011, 12-13) In short, Nova Scotia's current delivery model was in need of major reform.

Identifying the Critical Need For More Intensive Learning Support Schools

Nova Scotia's public school system, consisting of 424 Primary to Grade 12 schools, seeks to accommodate its 128,131 students in regular day programs offering a variety of possible "accommodations," normally within their local district school. The overarching mandate of the system, enshrined in the NS Education Department's mission, is "to provide excellence and training for personal fulfillment and for a productive and prosperous society." Since 2001, the province's Special Education Policy has reaffirmed its official commitment to "inclusive schooling," but allows for a continuum of program supports, including "options in programming and settings necessary to meet the student's needs." Learning support can be provided in "a variety of ways, in a variety of settings," including consulting services to classroom teachers, co-teaching, short-term/partial withdrawal from class, and temporary placements in specialized programs and short-term residential placements. The stated objective, in all cases, is "maximizing student growth and moving students toward independence and self-advocacy." (NSED, SEIRC Review, 2001, 17-18)

One in every ten Canadians, according to the most recent national research, lives with a learning disability of some kind, although many remain undiagnosed and hidden from public view. Out of the 128,131 students attending Nova Scotia schools in 2010-11, some 12,800 children are, in all likelihood, living and coping with some form of learning disability. A recent Halifax consultant's report estimated that many of those may well face learning challenges that are not currently being met in mainstream classrooms (Barrington Consulting Group, 2011, 15-16). Some 20% to 40% of those "special needs kids", the report claimed, have a more acute form of learning disability that would potentially benefit from an intensive, full-day support program such as that offered in only four Nova Scotia schools accommodating fewer than 220 students, all located within a 50 km radius of the Halifax Regional Municipality. This means that the vast majority of the province, located outside HRM, extending from Truro to Amherst and Yarmouth to Sydney, remains without access to such services.

Demand for places at Nova Scotia schools dedicated to serving Learning Disabled (LD) students far exceeds the current supply of available spaces. According to the 2011 Barrington Consulting study estimates, some 5,000 of the 12,800 students with a learning disability would reside in the area served by the Halifax Regional School Board, including some 3,022 with more acute needs (Table 1). In the Chignecto-Central Board, based in Truro, between 440 and 880 of the estimated 2,200 LD students would benefit from more intensive, full-day services. Applying the same statistical analysis, the numbers of potential students requiring full-day LD services in each of the remaining school boards would be from 302 to 603 in Cape Breton-Victoria Board, from 290 to 580 in Annapolis Valley Board, from 147 to 293 in the South Shore Board, 146 to 291 in the Strait Board, from 139 to 278 in the Tri-County Board, and from 93 to 185 in the Acadien provincial Board.

FIGURE 1 – Forecasted Demand for Special Education Schools, 2010-11

School Boards	Total Enrolment 2010-2011 Year	Lower End Projected (2%)	Upper End Projected (4%)	Total LD Students Projected (10%)
Cape Breton (CBVSB)	15,084	302	603	1,508
Strait Region (SRSB)	7,281	146	291	728
Chignecto (CCRSB)	21,994	440	880	2,199
Halifax (HRSB)	50,370	1,007	2,015	5,037
Annapolis (AVRSB)	14,496	290	580	1,450
South Shore (SSRSB)	7,334	147	293	733
Tri-County (TCRSB)	6,938	139	278	694
Acadian Provincial	4,634	93	185	463
TOTAL	128,131	2,563	5,125	12,813

Source: Barrington Consulting Group, Bridgeway Academy Feasibility Study (2011), 15.

Only three Nova Scotia schools, operating on four sites, now exist that are capable of responding to the special needs of this student population. The largest special education school, Bridgeway Academy (www.bridgeway-academy.com), originally founded by Lucinda Low in Wolfville, NS back in 1983, currently serves 86 students on its main Dartmouth campus and 16 more on a newer satellite campus in Truro, an hour north of HRM. A second HRM school, Churchill Academy (www.churchillacademy.ca), incorporated in 2004, provides individualized learning support to 60 students per year with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and other learning disabilities at its Dartmouth School, serving Grades 4 to 12 students. Since 1979, Landmark East School (www.landmarkeast.org), in Wolfville, NS, has provided education at the Grade 6 to 12 level for 40 to 50 students a year with learning differences, including dyslexia, ADHD, and non-verbal learning disabilities.

Currently, the Nova Scotia school system, with a Tuition Support Program in place since September 2004, is serving fewer than 220 students or about 10 per cent of the out of the estimated 2,200 students who would benefit from the learning support provided in such special education schools. Of greater concern is the fact that such services are limited to three areas of the province, the Halifax-Dartmouth region, Annapolis Valley, and Truro-Colchester County. Students and families living outside these areas have no access whatsoever to alternatives to mainstream programs in regular elementary schools or junior and senior high schools. In short, students at risk are not being educated to their fullest potential over a large swath of Nova Scotia, including larger population centres such as Sydney, Amherst, New Glasgow, Port Hawkesbury, and Sydney.

FIGURE 2 – Student Enrolment, Landmark East School, 2011-2012

Nova Scotia	Enrolment	Canadian Provinces – Outside Nova Scotia	Enrolment
Annapolis Valley RSB	12	Ontario	5
South Shore RSB	3	Quebec	2
Strait RSB	2	Nfld & L	2
Halifax RSB	2	New Brunswick	1
Chignecto Central RSB	1	PEI	1
Tri-County RSB	1	Saskatchewan	1
Subtotal (on TSP)	21	Alberta	1
Total (All Nova Scotia)	27	British Columbia	1
International	14	Sub-total	14

Total Enrolment: 55 (27, or 49% from Nova Scotia)

Source: Peter Coll, Landmark East School, Official Register, 21 February 2012

Origins and Development of the Tuition Support Program

The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP) may have been established in September 2004, but its origins run much deeper in the province. Since Dr. Mel Levinson founded the Montreal Children's Hospital Learning Centre in 1960, learning disabilities have been acknowledged and recognized, gradually over the years, in Canadian provincial educational systems. The initial impetus was to investigate and identify the factors explaining why students with average intelligence were still experiencing difficulties functioning in schools. From 1963 onwards, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, spearheaded the campaign to have Learning Disabilities recognized as a designated "exceptionality" and accepted as a way of accessing special education services (Price and Cole 2009, 6).

Nova Scotia, like other provinces, eventually recognized that children with Learning Disabilities (LD) required special programs. There have been a number of different funding arrangements over the years. At the very beginning, over thirty years ago, families had to apply to the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA) for funding to attend Landmark East and Bridgeway. Eventually, school boards began negotiating individual tuition agreements for a limited number of LD students, a precursor to the TSP (Lucinda Low Interview).

A series of Learning Disabilities conferences, organized by Judy Pelletier, helped to promote acceptance of the special needs of LD kids, leading to the authorizing of more and more tuition support agreements (Small 1982; Lucinda Low Interview). One of the key proponents of expanded services was Dr. Jean Backman of the IWK Hospital who became the principal architect of Nova Scotia's current special education system, based upon Individualized Program Plans (IPPs), documenting specific learning needs and accommodations. The Special Education Implementation Review Committee (SEIRC) produced a key report in 2001, favouring "inclusion" of special needs children in mainstream classes, but recognizing the limits of such a policy (NSED TSP Review 2009, 2-3).

When the numbers of families seeking IPPs could not be accommodated within existing regular classrooms, the Department of Education began to look at a new arrangement. The relocation of Bridgeway Academy to a larger Dartmouth school campus and the intensive lobbying efforts of parents, individually and collectively through the Equal Education Association (EANS) were critical in getting a Tuition Support on the public agenda (Rhonda Brown Interview). Former Premier Dr. John Hamm and his Education Minister, Jamie Muir, were among the first to come onside. Eventually, the concept of a provincial Tuition Support Program appeared in the 2002 Blueprint for the *Building a Better Nova Scotia* policy paper. It was initially introduced in September 2004 as a pilot project, involving the three schools and students that were funded under the TSP for one year with an option to renew for a second year. The "transitional" period for students was extended from 2 to 3 years in 2006-07 and further increased from 3 to 4 years in 2008-09 (Annie Baert Interview).

The TSP was unique in that it provided, for the first time, a provincial option for students with learning disabilities who met certain eligibility requirements, qualifying them for access to "specialized programming and services outside the framework of the Nova Scotia public school system (NSP)." Right from the beginning, the explicit intent of the program was to "provide students with the opportunity to develop strategies and skills which will support their successful transition back to their neighbourhood school, post-secondary learning and/or community." Funding was provided to cover up to 90% of the

tuition costs at officially approved designated special education private schools (DSEPS) or registered special education private schools (RSEPS). Since no French-first language special education schools existed, students deemed eligible in the Conseil Acadian School Board (CSAP), were given the right to transfer fees to schools outside the province of Nova Scotia (TSP Review 2009, 5).

The Nova Scotia TSP not only broke new ground, but survived two provincial program reviews. In June 2007, Education Minister Karen Casey received a Minister's Review of Students with Special Needs recommending that the TSP be ended, effective June 30, 2010 (Minister's Review, July 2007). That short and rather blunt report was flatly rejected by both the Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia (LDANS) and parents of students enrolled in the designated special education private schools. It led to a second, more comprehensive review, co-chaired by Annie Baert of LDANS and Gaye Rawding, Regional Education Officer with the NS Department of Education. Over a nine-month period, starting in June 2008, the TSP Review examined the long-term effectiveness of the program, the duration of placement, the research-based interventions and methods of instruction, transitional outcomes for students, criteria for acceptance, and the question of regional accessibility. The review was broader in scope, including ongoing consultation with the Equal Education Association of Nova Scotia (EEANS) and key personnel at the three DSEPS (TSP Review 2009, iii-v). Critical to the second review was a review of best practices completed by Dr. Anne Price of the Calgary Learning Centre (Price and Cole, 2009).

A new Minister of Education, the Hon. Marilyn More, finally weighed-in in favour of the TSP in March 2010. Effective 2010-11, students in DSEPS were authorized to receive support for 3 years, with an option for a 4th year intended for transition. Instead of shelving the program, the Department agreed to its continuance, provided that a "specific accountability reporting framework" was established to validate "student progress" in "academic, physical and social development" and that staff were provided with "professional development," specifically in the areas of student assessment and the IPP implementation. While hardly a ringing endorsement of the TSP, the Minister's Response laid to rest calls for its abandonment and recognized the validity of research supporting the option of special education schools (Minister's Response, March 2010, 3-5, 6, 9).

Current Status of the TSP And the "Lifeline Schools"

With the Minister's March 2010 policy statement, the Tuition Support Program became, in the words of Co-Chair Annie Baert, "more entrenched" in the Nova Scotia P-12 education system (Baert Interview, 28 Nov. 2011). The TSP was given a new lease-on-life, even though it remained strictly defined by the Department as "a short-term support program, rather than an alternative public school program, allowing students to transition back to the public school system." That status was confirmed when, after 2010-11, the limit of four years was more strictly enforced by the Department (Baert Interview, 29 Nov. 2011). In short, the TSP would continue, albeit as an anomaly, providing a measure of choice for students with recognized and documented Learning Disabilities.

Since the advent of the TSP in September 2004, the numbers of students receiving tuition support from the province has generally grown, in spite of a few peaks and hollows. In the initial year, 84 students received TSP subsidies, and by 2011-12, the number had doubled (over the eight years) to 165 students. Enrolment peaked in 2010-2011, when some longer-term students were granted a 5th or 6th year of eligibility for transition purposes. Over the first eight years, some 301 appeals for extension were heard by the Department, some of those appeals from the same families multiple times. The decision was overturned in 163 (54.2%) of the cases, upheld in 80 (26.5%) of the cases, and a smaller number (58 or 19.3%) either did not appeal or withdrew appeal requests (Baert Interview, 29 Nov, 2011).

Introducing the TSP has not caused much of a spurt of growth in the province's small private special education sector. Two of the three DSEPS, Bridgeway Academy and Churchill Academy, have achieved gains in student enrolment, while the third, Landmark East, has actually suffered losses, mostly attributable to the impact of the 2008 global financial meltdown on boarding school student numbers across North America. In the case of Churchill Academy, enrolment has been virtually capped at 60 students; so much of the overall increase has been accommodated at Bridgeway Academy, allowing the school to expand from Dartmouth to a second satellite campus in the Bible Hill/Truro area. Since September 2004, total Bridgeway enrolment has grown from 77 to 104 students, a 35% increase in students (Table 2 - Student Enrolments, 2004 to 2011).

FIGURE 3 - Student Enrolments, TSP and Bridgeway Academy, 2004 - 2011

Year	Total TSP	Bridgeway Academy Enrollment
2004-05	84	77
2005-06	124	74
2006-07	135	97
2007-08	122	98
2008-09	159	91 (5 at Truro)
2009-10	161	93 (9 at Truro)
2010-11	183*	102 (15 at Truro)
2011-12	165	104 (16 at Truro)

* NOTE: TSP program eligibility was extended to allow all current students the opportunity to access transition year, so some students were actually in 5th or 6th year

Source: NS Department of Education and Bridgeway Academy, November, 2011

The actual demand for Special Needs day schools like Bridgeway and Churchill in HRM and Truro-Bible Hill far exceeds the number of enrolled students. Active parent advocates like Wade Brummet and David Sampson testify to the obstacles facing prospective students and their families. The TSP may exist, but parents are still essentially left to discover it on their own. Under the current Special Education delivery model, it does not appear on the official “continuum of service” because it is delivered outside the public school system. Within the Halifax Regional School Board, a growing number of principals and Special Education teachers are favourably inclined to referring students, albeit as “a last resort” in most cases. An IPP assessment or a principal’s letter testifying to eligibility can be difficult to obtain, particularly in the Truro area of the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board. School principals have considerable discretion in deciding when and if IPPs are conducted in their schools. A delay of six months is expected, some take longer, and securing one in some schools is next to impossible (Brummet Interview, Sampson Interview). All of these factors contribute to the relatively low numbers of students qualifying for the TSP and attending DSEPS in Nova Scotia.

Many Nova Scotia students with acute LD needs cannot easily secure the required designation. Parents of children with special needs are expressing increasing concern about the state of the current Special Education system of identification and reporting. Some parent advocates like Wade Brummet of EEANS contend that “the IPP system is broken.” In making the case that all TSP candidates need not have an IPP report, Brummet provided this explanation: “Repeatedly parents contact EEANS with stories of IPPS not offered in cases where they clearly should have been per (under) special ed. Policy, pressuring not to accept them due to university restrictions, plans poorly drafted, and, most often, plans not followed.” (EEANS Brief 2010, 2)

Adoption of the TSP has provided Nova Scotia students with Learning Disabilities with a vitally important school option, at a particularly vulnerable time in their lives. By serving a hard to reach student population, the program also carries benefits for the public education system. Providing tuition assistance also lowers the rescue boats in the water, allowing a far more diverse range of children and families to gain access to intensive, full-day special education programming. For hundreds of LD children, the DSEPS have provided an educational lifeline and a second chance to succeed in school.

Insisting that the TSP serves only as a “short-term transition program” and limiting the “duration of placements” to a maximum of 4 years continues to cause difficulties. Most students surveyed at the three DSEPS during the 2009 TSP Review were very positive about their educational experience, and the vast majority of parents claimed that the schools had “saved their children.” (TSP Review 2009, 106-110, 55-

67) It was, in many cases, such a “life changing experience” that students and parents alike do not always welcome the prospect of transitioning back to the regular public school system. After a few years in such a school, benefiting from smaller classes and much more individual attention, going back to the district school can be upsetting, if not downright frightening. In a recent case, one student transitioning back experienced a serious personal crisis, necessitating emergency life-saving medical care and, in her case, a hastily-arranged exemption allowing her to return to the special education school (Sampson Interview). Giving all enrolled students the option of funding to complete their high school studies at a DSEP would certainly relieve that stress and anxiety felt in many families.

The Case for Expanding Public Access to Lifeline Schools

The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program has been a remarkable success and it now warrants expansion into under-served areas of the province. Since September 2004, it has already succeeded in meeting the serious needs of hundreds of students with Learning Disabilities, often of a severe type, in the HRM, Annapolis Valley, and Truro-Bible Hill areas of the province. After surviving two successive provincial reviews, it has been accepted as a vitally important supplement to the regular public school system. It's now time to take the next step and build upon that success.

Currently, only about 10% of the estimated number of Nova Scotian children struggling with severe learning difficulties has ready access to the designated special education schools. The 2009 *TSP Review* flagged the critical issue of regional accessibility, but it remains an unresolved matter. Left completely up to private venture schools operating from such a small base, it will not likely materialize in the near future. Closing the special education service gap for Learning Disabled children will require a provincial educational partnership strategy, recognizing the vitally important option provided by publicly-funded and regulated, but privately-operated, special education schools.

Recent Learning Disabilities education research, conducted by Dr. Anne Price for the NS Education Department, identified best practices around the world and supports a provincial service model offering a variety of learning support programs, including special placements in alternate school settings (Price and Cole 2009, 58-63). Price and her associate Mary Cole identified the limits of inclusion as a whole system approach and contended that “best practice is not dependent upon a particular model of service delivery.” The general consensus, they reported, was that no one single approach can possibly serve the diverse learning needs of all LD students. Surveying a range of models on the continuum from most segregated to most inclusive, they echoed N. Zigmond’s 2003 key findings that: effective practice is more important than location; students with LD require more time to learn; explicit and intensive instruction is critical; certain instructional practices are much easier in some settings; and more research is needed to connect research with placement decisions. Instead of accepting the theory that inclusion is good for every LD student, the focus should be on determining “who learns what best where.” (58-59)

Special education schools like Nova Scotia’s DSEPS are being increasingly recognized as a critical link in the total continuum of services for educating LD children across North America. After reviewing the whole continuum from inclusion in regular classrooms and resource withdrawal (i.e. pull-out programs) to special placements in alternative settings or private segregated schools, Price and Cole (2009) demonstrate that LD students are far better served through the provision of a range of options. “The general consensus in current research,” they conclude, “is that the implementation of the elements of best practice is important and not dependent upon a particular method of service delivery. In terms of alignment with best practices...a continuum of services acknowledges that ‘no one size fits all’ for students with LD and that flexibility to meet specific needs is required.” (Price and Cole 2009, 72) In sum, private segregated schools do have a role in meeting “the diverse needs of students with LD across the school years.” (Price and Cole 2009, 72-73)

Supporting the private special education schools is also far more cost-effective than trying to duplicate the specialized, intensive supports through the regular school system. In the 2007-2008 school year, the NS Education Department reported spending \$1.2 million to educate 128 students with TSP funding support. The bulk of this cost (\$9375.00 per student) was covered by the funding unit transfer of \$6,400 per

student. Some \$2,975.00 per student was spent to administer the program and to provide supplemental subsidies to lower income families in need of extra subsidies. Roughly half of the families with enrolled children were reported to be receiving some form of supplemental funding during the school year (EEANS Brief 2010, 2).

Taking TSP costs in 2008-09 as an example, serving those 128 students in the regular school system would be far more costly. Virtually all TSP enrolled students, according to the Equal Education Association, are at least 2 years behind the grade level of their age group in reading and/or numeracy and would easily qualify for a Severe Learning Disability (SLD) designation if they could secure such identification, supplemented by a resource class. Assuming a teaching year of 195 school days (i.e. 186 actual instructional days of six hours), the total instructional time amounts to about 1,116 teaching hours per academic year. Based upon a \$60,000 average salary and benefits cost, these professionals cost about \$53.00 per hour of instruction. Assuming 2 hours per week of SLD with only 20 minutes a day in resource class, the average LD student would receive about 142 hours of assistance for a yearly total cost of \$7,526.00. Comparing that cost with TSP costs per student, the EEANS contends, amounts to a possible savings of \$4,551 per student with the TSP in place (EEANS Brief 2010, 2).

While the EEANS differential cost assessments might be problematic, the cost-benefit analysis finds confirmation elsewhere. The Halifax Regional Board of Education, in its 2007 response to the Minister's Review of Special Education, expressed concern over the possible financial impact of having to provide comparable in-school support for this student population. In addition to the 70 students then receiving tuition support, the HRSB reported that it had "many students with similar profiles" requiring higher levels of service. "To provide the level of service that is being provided through this tuition [support] program," the HRSB noted, "would require substantial additional resources. Issues of space, qualified staff, transportation, and supplies and resources would need to be addressed through the budget process." (HRSB Report No. 07-09-1070, 7) It might also be noted that, under existing service levels, these additional costs would only support some 3 hours and 40 minutes of intensive in-school support per week, significantly less time than provided by DSEPS each day operating under the current tuition support program.

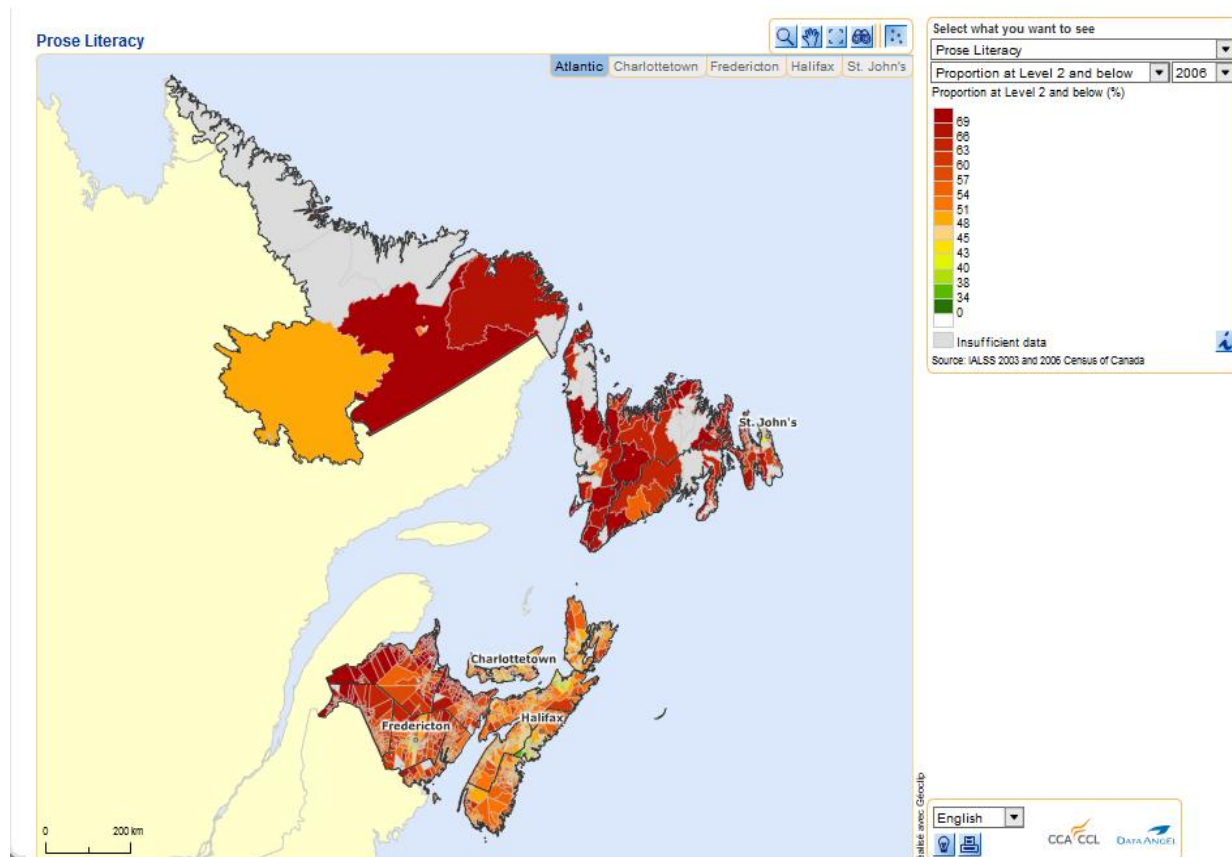
Schools recognized under the TSP have already proven to be most effective in rescuing Nova Scotian students with acute learning needs. Nova Scotia's 2009 *Tuition Support Program Review* was the most comprehensive, thorough assessment ever undertaken and the specialized services offered by the TSP-supported DSEPS came through with flying colours on most counts.

Dr. Anne Price of the Calgary Learning Centre demonstrated that private, tuition-supported schools were well-aligned with best practice across North America and far beyond in the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and South Africa (Price and Cole 2009, 4). A cross-section of education partners, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and former participants (students and parents) spoke positively about the experience on surveys commissioned by the Department of Education. Teachers employed by the DSEPS may need more professional development and the DSEPS might benefit from the establishment of measurement metrics, but these are clearly solvable issues. Supplementary funding was helping families of limited means who needed it the most. The overall feedback was fairly conclusive: the DSEPS, supported by the TSP, are not only rescuing struggling students, but likely saving lives. They were also succeeding admirably in restoring the confidence of students currently marginalized by the regular public school system.

Nova Scotia has a chronic adult literacy problem and investing in improved support for students with learning disabilities could form a critical piece in a province-wide effort to raise literacy levels, improve

productivity, and reduce long-term social costs. Some 45% of Nova Scotia adults are reportedly functioning at Level 2 or below in literacy (Statistics Canada, 2005), a large proportion of whom suffer from learning disabilities that were not serviced in elementary or secondary education. Since the release of the 2007 TD Bank study, entitled *Literacy Matters: A Call to Action*, public awareness of adult illiteracy and its longer-term economic impact have grown (Alexander, TD Bank, 2007). It's now common knowledge that Atlantic Canada is lagging in literacy and numeracy levels with more than half of the adult population “below the minimum skills level suitable for coping with the everyday demands of everyday life and work.” (CAMEC, 2010) Shifts in public funding for adult training from educational upgrading to short-term workplace training may actually be compounding the problem. Expanding the Tuition Support Program (TSP) could well become the best investment down the road in addressing the interrelated problems of adult illiteracy and workplace productivity (Paul McNeil Interview 2012).

FIGURE 4 – ADULT LITERACY – MAP OF PROSE LITERACY: ATLANTIC CANADA and HALIFAX REGION, 2006



This is an interactive map. For a more in-depth look, visit: http://www.ccl-cca.ca/cclflash/proseliteracy/map_atlantic_regions_e.html

The Canadian Council on Learning's 2006 *Lessons in Learning* project identified and mapped the pattern of prose literacy in Atlantic Canada and in the Halifax Region. It identified pockets of highest illiteracy by mapping areas of Prose Literacy where the proportion of adults functioned at Level 2 and below. It gives the clearest indication of where adult illiteracy runs highest in Nova Scotia. (Source: Canadian Council on Learning (2006). *Lessons in Learning: Using the Prose Literacy Map*. Ottawa: CCL, 2006. <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/ccl/Topic/Literacy/UsingMap.html>)

The Nova Scotia public education system, since the 2005 adoption of *Learning for Life II*, has sought to close the achievement gap by finding new, innovative ways of serving hard to reach students and communities (NSED, *Learning for Life II*, 2005, 7-16). More recently, the Minister of Education's 2010 decision to re-affirm support for the TSP could well mark a turning point in provincial education policy. Recognizing the critical needs of Learning Disabled (LD) students is an encouraging sign; proceeding to promote and expand accessibility in all parts of the province would be a welcome move with profound implications for the future. The current TSP is having a limited impact because it is only available in HRM and surrounding areas. As Nova Scotians, we all have an interest in supporting students who need it most and the province has an opportunity to become a flagship for a renewed system recognizing that serving student needs should take precedence over ideology or established practices. The provincial goal should be to have future generations of LD students better prepared for success in life and in the workplace.

Summary and Recommendations

One in ten Canadians reportedly suffers from some kind of learning disability and between 2 % and 4% of Nova Scotia's public school students, numbering from 2,500 to 5,000, are struggling at school with serious learning challenges. Rescuing and properly educating special needs kids with severe learning disabilities has proven a challenge in the province's regular Primary to Grade 12 schools. A small number of private, independent schools have emerged since the 1970s to fill the gap by providing a vitally important "lifeline" in the continuum of student support services. Demand for such schooling grew after 2000 to the point where the Nova Scotia Department of Education began looking at implementing a provincial tuition support program serving students with more acute learning difficulties.

The Tuition Support Program (TSP), reaffirmed by the Department in March 2010, provides a vitally important option for students with special needs who cannot be served at their local public school. Its very success has presented the Department of Education with a new challenge – making it more widely accessible in all parts of the province. Closing the learning gap in Nova Scotia is a worthwhile policy goal, but it will not be fully realized in Special Education Services until the TSP is available to families with LD children right across Nova Scotia.

This AIMS research report has explored the origins of Nova Scotia's TSP, thoroughly assessed its current status, and examined the potential for expanding in Nova Scotia outside the Greater Halifax-Truro region. After reviewing the TSP's successes and challenges, this report is drawn to one inescapable conclusion: Demand for such intensive LD support services throughout the province far exceeds the current number of available spots and some areas in Western Nova Scotia, eastern Nova Scotia, and Cape Breton Island remain without any schools meeting the acute needs of LD students. What follows is a set of key recommendations, mapping out a provincial education strategy for closing the gap in the provision of enhance learning supports for children with Learning Disabilities. Our goal should be nothing less that to provide all LD children with a complete range of service options and an opportunity to reach their fullest potential in school and in life beyond.

Key Recommendations:

Providing tuition subsidies in the form of per-student grants (or vouchers) has proven to be successful in meeting the unique Special Education needs of a hard-to-serve student population. Given best practice research, there is a clear place for private special education schools in the overall continuum of service. It follows, then, that students with Learning Disabilities in Nova Scotia would be better served by expanding the scope and range of access to the existing Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP). It will require nothing less than a provincial strategy to build upon the existing base of DSEPS and extend service beyond the Greater Halifax region to the other major population centres.

It is recommended that:

Recommendation 1:

The Nova Scotia Education Department, working in collaboration with the Equal Education Association, develop a new continuum of service model recognizing the essential role played by designated special education private schools (DSEPS) in providing a full continuum of service for students experiencing severe learning difficulties, and adopt a comprehensive, province-wide strategy to implement the new model.

Recommendation 2:

The Education Department encourage the establishment of, within five years, at least one special education private school, modelled after Bridgeway Academy, in each of the eight provincial school board districts, including the Acadian provincial school board.

Recommendation 3:

The Education Department, working in collaboration with the DSEPS (School Heads and Board Chairs), the Equal Education Association and other interested stakeholders, identify and eliminate all barriers to the swift achievement of Recommendation 2.

More specifically, the Education Department should:

- a) In collaboration with the DSEPS (School Heads and Board Chairs) develop provincial guidelines, resources, and a handbook aimed at encouraging the establishment of more special education private schools capable of meeting the needs of children with acute Learning Disabilities;
- b) Consider waiving or otherwise weakening the restrictions on access to TSP funding for new DCEPS start-ups that formally commit to adhering to the advice and direction included in the guideline, resources and handbook;
- c) Conduct a full Provincial Review investigating identified concerns with the current Special Education identification, placement, and reporting system, focusing on the Individual Program Placement (IPP) process, including an audit of recent IPPs on a board-by-board basis;
- d) Contract Nova Scotia university faculties of education, serving three different geographic areas, to introduce Special Education training programs (with part-time, evening sessions) specifically for current and prospective teachers in the DSEPS;
- e) Require all Nova Scotia school boards to develop closer partnerships with existing and future DSEPS to enable smoother transitions and to ensure that students with learning disabilities do not slip through the cracks in the system;
- f) In collaboration with the Equal Education Association, develop a province-wide communications strategy to promote awareness of DSEPS and the application process for TSP subsidies;

Recommendation 4:

The next full Provincial Review of the TSP, in 2015, should focus on further strengthening the program by reporting on:

- best practices in DSEP schools;
- the desirability of formally recognizing “special education alternative schools;”
- the demand for school-to-workplace apprenticeship programs;
- the advantages of extending the potential duration of TSP eligibility through to high school graduation based on annual individualized assessments after year three.

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