



Policy



Paper

Extending the Educational Lifeline

The Tuition Support Program and Its
Benefits for Special Needs Students

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The Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS)

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About the Author

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Today Paul is primarily an education policy analyst and commentator, producing regular columns and book reviews for *The Chronicle Herald* and articles for *Progress Magazine* and a variety of publications. His most recent academic articles have appeared in *Acadiensis*, *Historical Studies in Education*, and the *Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society Journal*. Over the past five years, he has produced major policy papers for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, the Society for Quality Education, and the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools Association. He specializes in K-12 educational policy, education history, educational standards, school governance, teacher education, and special education services.

Two personal stories

“It was a five year struggle for us The change was miraculous. He stopped acting out, began doing his work and felt more accepted. It was a tremendous relief. Finally, there was hope for him to be successful for the first time.”

- Mother of former Bridgeway Academy student, 2011-2014, Nova Scotia

“Having M. attend Riverbend School has definitely reduced his personal stress level but in turn has added tremendous financial stress As working parents supporting three children, we already have struggles and challenges. Raising a child with special needs and severe learning disabilities and no financial support has been extremely difficult and takes everything we have.”

- Korey Breen, Parent of Riverbend Community School student, Moncton, New Brunswick

Overview:

The crying need for special support programs

Struggling students in Moncton, New Brunswick, have very few options outside the regular mainstream public school system. For elementary students with severe learning challenges and their families, Riverbend Community School is really the only option, and, even then, only viable when they can scrape together the money to pay its hefty \$11,500 tuition fees. Since its inception as a day school in September 2013, a small but growing number of families are doing just that, attracted by the passion of its youthful director, Rebecca Bulmer, and founder/co-director Jordan Halliday, often desperate for a special program specifically designed to respond to their children and their extraordinary needs. “If you have a struggling and confused child in your life,” Bulmer says, “we can help. We can replace fear and anxiety with pride and success” (Bulmer interview, April 15, 2015). That was also the key message of her April 2015 CBC Moncton *Information Morning* series called “Learning Outside the Box,” which explained the world of learning disabilities (LD) to a new audience (Bulmer, 2015).

The Moncton school for high-risk students is filling a gaping hole in the system. Students and their parents are finding the Riverbend Community School completely on their own because it flies below the radar and is funded entirely by fee-paying parents. Like most such independent ventures, it exists because of the sheer dedication



and commitment of its founders, Rebecca and her mother, Priscilla Wilson, the retired school teacher who first saw the need and, back in 2008, opened her own Moncton tutoring centre (Bulmer, 2015). Out of that small project emerged today's Riverbend School, a growing presence with 10 day students and some 40 students enrolled in its after-school tutoring programs in reading and mathematics. All have been drawn to this tiny, warm, home-like Moncton school that pledges to "discover the potential" in each child and is prepared to provide "the proper intervention" needed to transform each child into "resilient, independent learners ready to take on the world" (Riverbend Community School, 2015).

Students attempting to overcome severe learning challenges in today's regular classrooms need an educational lifeline. For Dartmouth student Nick and his mother, Jennifer, the ordeal lasted four long years in two different public schools — from primary (kindergarten) to the end of Grade 4. Unable to read after Grade 1, Nick was trying to understand many of his worksheets and was, in his mother's words, "completely lost." "I saw the deterioration in his spirit," she now recalls, and it pained her to see him "frequently punished for his classroom misbehaviour." By Grade 4, Nick was becoming angry. "Why am I so stupid?" he asked, after being belittled inside and outside of class.

...between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of Nova Scotia's public school students, numbering from 2,400 to 4,800, are struggling with serious learning challenges.

Gaining admission to Bridgeway Academy, a Dartmouth special needs school, with financial aid from Nova Scotia's Tuition Support

Program (TSP) changed their lives. Within a matter of weeks, Nick was on the road to recovery. It was a tremendous relief for Jennifer to see the look in his eyes. She saw the glimmer of "a happy, confident child who knew he was capable of success in life." Her boy was not alone in his struggles. Today, some 220 to 230 students like Nick benefit from the educational lifeline program made accessible through what is best known as the TSP (personal interview, anonymous parent, 2015).

Nick and his family are among the lucky ones. One in 10 Canadians reportedly suffers from some form of learning disability, and between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of Nova Scotia's public school students, numbering from 2,400 to 4,800, are struggling with serious learning challenges. Without easy, affordable access to special intensive programs and schools, up to 14,000 students across Atlantic Canada face serious learning challenges and struggle on the margins. Does Nova Scotia have the answer? This is the fundamental question explored in this research report and commentary.



Rescuing and properly educating special needs children with severe LD have proven a challenge in Nova Scotia’s regular primary to Grade 12 schools. A small number of private, independent schools has 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 and Early Childhood Development (NSDE) began looking at implementing a provincial tuition-support program to serve students with more-acute learning difficulties.

The TSP, initiated in September 2004, provides an option for students with special needs who cannot be served at their local public schools. It is explicitly intended for short-term purposes and works on the assumption that students can eventually be successfully “transitioned” back into the regular system. The TSP provides funding that covers most of the tuition costs to attend designated special education private schools (DSEPS) and any public alternative education centres that might eventually be established in Nova Scotia.

[TSP] is explicitly intended for short-term purposes and works on the assumption that students can eventually be successfully “transitioned” back into the regular system.

Since my initial AIMS report, *A Provincial Lifeline: Expanding the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program*, three years ago, the TSP has been sustained and further improved in the province but has yet to appear in either New Brunswick or Prince Edward Island. Successive Nova Scotia governments have renewed their commitment to the provincial program

and even allocated more funding to accommodate more of the most severely learning challenged students in the few regions with grant-eligible DSEPS. Consistent and reliable support from the Nova Scotia Department of Education has been of great help to families that are in — or near — crisis. Small modifications have made TSP easier to qualify for and have provided much more certainty for parents who have severely challenged children and who are often desperately in need of financial assistance to pay the tuition fees. Solid progress has been made since February 2012, but more can be done to ensure the sustainability of TSP and its adoption in neighbouring provinces.

Full inclusion is now the overriding philosophy everywhere, as it should be, but it is only the beginning. Inclusive programs and services require extraordinary levels of investment to achieve the level of support attained in specialized-program schools. Only one out of every three Nova Scotians surveyed in the 2014 Nova Scotia Education



Review reports that “special programs and services are meeting the needs of all students” (Freeman, 2014, 40). Growing numbers of educators, in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, recognize that funding full inclusion for all through to graduation is simply not a realistic option. This is a major reason a clear majority of Nova Scotia teachers surveyed last year, from 63 per cent to 76 per cent depending upon grade level, went on record claiming that “special programs and services” in the public school system were not working to meet the needs of all students (Freeman, 2014, 41).

Families with vulnerable children and teens are in dire need of an educational helping hand. For some 2 per cent to 4 per cent of children and youth with severe learning challenges, the regular classroom is the problem (Bennett, 2012NS, 2012NB). If that is the case, then we need to look at different ways of delivering a “full spectrum” of services. The proven results of Nova Scotia’s TSP are the clearest indication, so far, that severely learning-challenged students can achieve greater success and that it is time to sweep away the remaining obstacles to change.

The next frontier is New Brunswick, where the needs are great and the options severely limited for children who do not fit the current one-size-fits-all model of public schooling. One school already exists, Riverbend Community School in Moncton, and it could well be the logical place to start in accrediting DSEPS along the same lines as in Nova Scotia. In New Brunswick, it has to start somewhere because the crying needs of severely learning-challenged students are simply not being met under the current model (Bennett, 2012NB). This report will make it clear that Riverbend Community School offers exactly the kind of special education program urgently needed, not just in Greater Moncton but — where numbers warrant — throughout New Brunswick. It is time to consider extending tuition support in order to level the playing field and make this service available to a far wider range of children and their families.



Search for a new paradigm – the “most enabling environment”

“The new paradigm, in order to achieve equality for all children, is that the school system must provide all children with an education in the most enabling environment — one that will a) effectively and in a timely fashion address all their needs ...; b) provide the necessary accommodation that enables them to fully access all the programs provided by the school system; c) provide a continuum of placements in order to fulfill the foregoing.”

- Yude Henteleff, C.M., Q.C., Winnipeg lawyer, National Summit on Inclusive Education, November 24, 2004, Ottawa, Ontario

The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program and its origins

The Nova Scotia TSP was established in September 2004, but its origins run much deeper in the province. From 1963 onward, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC), spearheaded the campaign to have LD 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 LD require special programs. A few different funding arrangements have existed over the years. At the very beginning, over 30 years ago, families had to apply to the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority for funding to attend Landmark East School and Bridgeway Academy. Eventually, school boards began negotiating individual tuition agreements for a limited number of LD students, a precursor to the TSP (Lucinda Low interview, 2011).

A series of LD conferences organized by Judy Pelletier helped to promote acceptance of the special needs of LD children, which led to the authorizing of more and more Tuition Support Agreements (TSA) (Small 1982; Low interview, 2011). One of the key proponents of expanded services was Dr. Jean Backman of the IWK Health Centre, who became the principal architect of Nova Scotia’s current special education system, which is based upon Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) that document specific learning needs and accommodations. The Special Education Implementation Review Committee produced a key report in 2001 that favoured the inclusion of special needs children in mainstream classes but recognized the limits of such a policy (NSED TSP Review 2009, 2-3).



When the number 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 of Nova Scotia (EEANS) were critical in getting 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 TSP appeared in the 2003 Blueprint for Building a Better Nova Scotia policy paper. It was introduced in September 2004 as a pilot project and involved the three schools. Students 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 two years to three in 2006-2007 and further increased from three years to four in 2008-2009 (Annie Baert interview, 2011).

The TSP was unique in that it provided, for the first time, a provincial option for students with LD who met certain eligibility requirements that qualified 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 that will support their successful transition back to their neighbourhood school, post-secondary learning and/or community.” Funding to cover up to 90 per cent of the tuition costs at officially approved *DSEPS or registered special education private schools* was provided. Since no French first-language special education schools existed, students deemed eligible in the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial were given the right to transfer fees to schools outside the province of Nova Scotia (TSP Review 2009, 5).

The TSP was unique in that it provided, for the first time, a provincial option for students with LD who met certain eligibility requirements...

The Nova Scotia TSP broke new ground and survived two provincial program reviews. In June 2007, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development Karen Casey received the *Minister’s Review of Services for Students with Special Needs*, which recommended that the TSP end effective June 30, 2010 (Minister’s Review, July 2007). The Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia (LDANS) and parents of students enrolled in the DSEPS flatly rejected this short and rather blunt report. This led to a second, more-comprehensive review co-chaired by Annie Baert of LDANS and Gaye Rawding, regional education officer with the Nova Scotia 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 EEANS and key personnel at the three DSEPS (TSP Review 2009, iii-v). Critical to the second review was the review of best practices completed by Dr. Anne Price of the Calgary Learning Centre, now the CanLearn Society (Price and Cole, 2009).

A new Minister of Education, Marilyn More, finally weighed in in favour of the TSP in March 2010. Effective 2010-2011, students in DSEPS were authorized to receive support for three years, with an option for a fourth year, which is intended for transition. Instead of shelving the program, the Department agreed to its continuance provided a “specific accountability reporting framework” was established to validate “student progress” in “academic, physical and social development” and that staff

...the Minister’s Response laid to rest calls for the abandonment of the TSP and recognized the validity of research supporting the option of special education schools...

were given “professional development,” specifically in the areas of student assessment and IPPs implementation. While hardly a ringing endorsement of the TSP, the Minister’s Response laid to rest calls for the abandonment of the TSP and recognized the validity of research supporting the option of special education schools (Minister’s Response, March 2010, 3-5, 6, 9).

With the Minister’s March 2010 policy statement, the TSP became, in the words of Co-chair Annie Baert, “more entrenched” in the Nova Scotia P-12 education system (Baert interview, 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.” This status was confirmed when, after 2010-2011, the limit of four years was more-strictly enforced by the Department (Baert interview, November 29, 2011). In short, the TSP would continue, albeit as an anomaly, providing a measure of choice for students with recognized and documented LD.

Since the advent of the TSP, the number of students receiving tuition support from the province has gradually grown in spite of a few peaks and hollows. In the initial year, 84 students received TSP subsidies, and by 2011-2012, the number had more than doubled to 183 students. Enrollment spiked in 2010-2011 when some longer-term students were granted a fifth or sixth year of eligibility for transition purposes.



Over the first eight years, the Department heard some 301 appeals for extension; some of those appeals came from the same families multiple times. The decision was overturned in 163 (54.2 per cent) of the cases, upheld in 80 (26.5 per cent) of the cases, and a smaller number (58 or 19.3 per cent) either did not appeal or withdrew appeal requests (Baert interview, 2011).

Solidifying the TSP has been of benefit to the DSEPS in Nova Scotia. In the case of Landmark East, a Wolfville boarding and day school, it has helped to attract and maintain a healthier day school enrollment. Since Headmaster Peter Coll's arrival in June of 2010, enrollment, driven mostly by a dramatic increase in Nova Scotia students, has grown from 38 to 75 students. While Landmark East only enrolled 21 Nova Scotia students in 2009-2010, it now has 48 local students, including 43 from the surrounding Annapolis Valley Regional School Board (Landmark East, Enrolment, 2009-2015). "We specialize in addressing language-based learning difficulties," Coll says. "Having the TSP simply allows us to serve more local kids and families" (Coll interview, 2015).



The purpose of the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program

“The Tuition Support Program (TSP) provides an option for students who meet program eligibility requirements to access specialized programming and services outside the framework of the Nova Scotia public school system (PSP). The intent of the TSP is 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.”

- Tuition Support Program, Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, <http://tuitionsupport.ednet.ns.ca/> (2015)

Establishment and acceptance of the TSP from 2010 to 2015

The introduction of the TSP aided student enrollment but did not lead to a dramatic expansion in the province’s small private special education sector. All three DSEPS, Bridgeway Academy, Churchill Academy and Landmark East, have achieved modest gains in student numbers. After weathering the impact of the 2008 global financial meltdown, Landmark East recovered and succeeded in securing a more-stable, modestly growing student population. In the case of Churchill Academy, enrollment was virtually capped at 63 to 65 students up until 2011-2012; so much of the overall increase was accommodated at Bridgeway Academy, which allowed the school to expand from Dartmouth to a second satellite campus in the Bible Hill/Truro area. From September 2004 until 2012, Bridgeway enrollment grew from 77 to 104 students, a 35 per cent increase (Bennett, 2012, 9-10). With the help of Annie Baert and the Department of Education, the DSEPS are winning support one school at a time. Securing the paperwork, in the form of an IPP or a letter of permission, became a little easier. “Schools have to agree that students are not meeting the curriculum outcomes,” Coll reports. “Some schools are receptive; others reluctant or resistant,” limiting the potential for more students (Coll, 2015).

The Nova Scotia TSP is more robust today than it was five years ago. Since the 2011-2012 school year, the TSP has attracted more students and experienced a modest growth in its overall budget. Data provided by the Department of Education in February 2015 demonstrate that overall TSP enrollment has risen from 172 to between 213 and 230 students. The overall cost of the provincial program, including students with both TSP funding and extension TSA has increased from \$1.64-million



TABLE 1

Growth in the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program 2010-2011 to 2014-2015

Year	No. of Students	Funding Unit	Total Costs	Cost per TSP Student
2010-2011	183	\$7,100	\$1,671,716	\$9,135.06
2011-2012	172	\$7,200	\$1,639,382	\$9,531.29
2012-2013	212	\$7,300	\$2,091,725	\$9,866.62
2013-2014	230	\$7,600	\$2,448,296	\$10,644.76
2014-2015*	213	\$7,900	\$2,431,208	\$11,414.13

Source: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, February 2015. Calculations of Cost per Student are by the author. Asterisk: Incomplete, Year to Date, 2014-2015.

a year to approximately \$2.4-million a year. The provincial program serves as many as 230 students, or approximately 25 per cent more students than it did in 2010-2011. The cost per student for the TSP plus the TSA has also risen from \$9,531 in 2011-2012 to approximately \$11,414 in 2014-2015 (NSDE, 2015). This is quite consistent with the overall growth in cost per student in the public education system province wide in Nova Scotia. In 2011-2012, for example, the Nova Scotia cost per pupil was \$12,031 compared with \$9,531 for high-needs students funded by the TSP (Van Pelt and Emes, 2015, 13).

Extending Tuition Support to Nova Scotia students with severe learning challenges is proving to be the most cost-effective option. Students applying for the TSP are at least two years behind their age group grade level. Virtually all of the eligible students would qualify for a Severely Learning Disabled (SLD) designation if they could get a spot and secure a resource class placement in a regular day school. The most they could receive in the regular schools would be two hours of SLD help per week and perhaps 20 minutes per day in a resource class, totalling approximately 116 hours of services a year. This is far short of the 4.5 hours a day of intensive support provided in a DSEPS, which equals approximately 810 hours per year (Sampson, Tuition Support Briefing, 2012). Assuming the cost per student for TSP is \$11,414.00 in 2014-2015 (NSDE, 2015), this is not only lower than the average cost per student province wide, but also considerably less than what it actually costs for SLD students in regular schools.



Adoption of the TSP has provided Nova Scotia students with LD 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 into 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 (Bennett, 2012, 10). Its success in meeting the needs of SLD students provides important lessons for the neighbouring provinces of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, where students and families struggle on without much in the way of support outside the regular school classroom.



The Jeffrey Moore decision, 2012

“Adequate special education, therefore, is not a dispensable luxury. For those with severe learning disabilities, it is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to all children in British Columbia.”

- Judge Rosalie Abella, Supreme Court of Canada, November 9, 2012

The current Nova Scotia model after the Jeffrey Moore Case

The TSP may have put Nova Scotia ahead of the curve in responding to students with special needs. The landmark November 2012 Supreme Court of Canada decision in the Jeffrey Moore case effectively changed the whole policy landscape. That ruling put schools on strict notice that they cannot neglect or evade their responsibility to accommodate children with special needs. Brushing aside the financial woes of a North Vancouver school board, the Court concluded on November 9, 2012 that the school board had discriminated against a dyslexic child who was not given adequate help to attain literacy (Levy, 2014). Madam Justice Rosalie Abella ordered school authorities to reimburse Moore’s family for several years of costly private education they sought after Jeffrey fell far behind in school. “Adequate special education, therefore, is not a dispensable luxury,” Judge Abella wrote in her 9-0 judgement statement. “For those with severe learning disabilities, it is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to *all* children in British Columbia” (Makin, 2012).

The Jeffrey More decision confirmed that Nova Scotia was on the right track when compared with neighbouring provinces. In British Columbia, where Moore resided, there was a complete lack of funding for SLD students who were unable to cope in regular schools. This is not the case in Nova Scotia, where the TSP provides, on application, tuition support for DSEPS and supplemental assistance up to 90 per cent of total fees in cases of demonstrable need. Before the Moore decision, according to Winnipeg lawyer Yude Henteleff, school boards claimed, “We can’t afford this.” “Now,” he added, “they can’t afford not to” (Makin, 2012). With more parents like Jeffrey Moore’s taking up the cause, the TSP looks more and more like a practical, affordable alternative. Transferring fees to students attending a DSEPS is a small price to pay given the proven effectiveness of such intensive alternative support programs.



Special programs for students with special needs are anchored in the key formulations of Nova Scotia human rights and education policy and supported by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Under the Charter, Section 15, everyone is recognized as being “equal before and under the law,” but also entitled to “equal protection and equal *benefit* of the law” (author’s emphasis) without discrimination. In similar fashion, the *Nova Scotia Human Rights Act* prohibits imposing “burdens, obligations or disadvantages on an individual or class of individuals ... not imposed upon others ... in society.” It is not sufficient to treat everyone in an identical fashion when some “benefit” less than others do from those services. Rather, the law or service provider must ensure that the individuals or groups affected receive the same benefit from the law or service as the public at large does (Levy, 2014).

The public demand for Special Education schools in Nova Scotia far exceeds the supply of student spaces.

Nova Scotia’s education policy framework also allows for access to not only “inclusive education” but also “appropriate education” that meets the special needs of certain classes of individuals. The preamble to the *Education Act* affirms the education system’s commitment to “fair and equitable participation and *benefit* by all people in Nova Scotia.” (author’s emphasis) Under Section 146 (1), the Governor in Council (premier and Cabinet) is authorized to make regulations with respect to a lengthy list of matters, including, in sub-section (xa), matters related to DSEPS and specifically in “defining special needs” (xa) (i). A provincial Regulation, Section 67, clarifies who qualifies as a student with special needs. Such students are those with “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or a learning disability (LD), as diagnosed by *either* (i) a licensed physician, or (ii) a registered psychologist or candidate registered psychologist with expertise and training in making the diagnosis. Nova Scotia’s Special Education Policy also “recognizes and endorses the basic right of all students to full and equal participation in education,” immediately followed by the Charter’s dual commitment to the “right to appropriate education” as well as to “inclusive education” (Levy, 2014). In short, the “benefit” test is critical and access to special needs programs includes “appropriate education” in the case of students with severe needs that are well beyond the current capacity of regular schools.

The public demand for Special Education schools in Nova Scotia far exceeds the supply of student spaces. Based upon research conducted by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, it is estimated that between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of Nova Scotia’s public school students, numbering from 2,400 to 4,800, are struggling with



serious learning challenges (Barrington Consulting Group, 2011, 15-16). Rescuing and properly educating special needs children with SLD have proven a challenge in the province's regular primary to Grade 12 schools. Taken together, the three existing special independent schools enroll from 213 to 230 TSP-supported students. They are accommodated on three campuses and three small satellite sites in Truro/Bible Hill, Stellarton and Yarmouth (Bridgeway, 2015).

Over time, the day schools have gradually become more dependent upon TSP funding to sustain their enrollment levels. In the case of Churchill Academy, some 90 per cent to 95 per cent of the student body is on TSP grants that cover up to 90 per cent of the tuition fees (Churchill Academy, 2015; NSDE, 2015). Since 2010-2011, Nova Scotia enrollment at Landmark East has grown from 31 students to 48 students, while the numbers on TSP grants have risen from 24 to 42 students, representing 77.4 per cent and 87.5 per cent of the cohort (Landmark East, Enrolment, 2010-2015; NSDE, 2015). "If the TSP disappeared," Churchill Academy Head Pat Doherty said succinctly, "we'd struggle to get 50 kids, and they wouldn't be able to stay so long" (Pat Doherty interview, 2015).

Nova Scotia's DSEPS meet the needs of a diverse population, drawn from a middle range socio-economic demographic. A sizeable proportion of the students attending the DSEPS, perhaps over 50 per cent of total enrollment, comes from families that

TABLE 2			
Students Supported by Tuition Support Program, by School 2010-2011 to 2014-2015			
School Year	DSEPS and Number in TSP and on TSA		
	Bridgeway Academy	Churchill Academy	Landmark East School
2010-2011	96	63	24
2011-2012	93	57	22
2012-2013	104 (+6 TSA)	64 (+5 TSA)	33
2013-2014	7 (+15 TSA)	71 (+10 TSA)	37
2014-2015*	88 (+12 TSA)	71 (+11 TSA)	38 (+4 TSA)

Source: Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, February 2015.
Asterisk: Incomplete, Year to Date, 2014-2015.



cannot afford private schools that charge between \$13,000 and \$25,000 (for day students). Most of the families are distinctly middle income, since between 60 per cent and 75 per cent of the students qualify for supplemental funding that is awarded based on need (NSDE, 2015). One Landmark East supporter, Bob Levy, recently acknowledged that many parents are still incurring “a considerable, perhaps prohibitive, financial burden arising from their child attending a DSEPS” (Levy, 2014).

Parents like Lynne Bartlett, whose 12-year-old daughter attends Bridgeway Academy, struggle to make ends meet. Even with the TSP, she has to find \$460 per month to pay the shortfall between the fees and the support. “The Tuition Support Program is always at risk because it is not in legislation,” she says. “From one year to the next, we are unsure if this funding will be available or not. It’s already enough of a financial burden, with the existing support Every child in Nova Scotia should have access to schools like Bridgeway no matter where they live or how much money their parents make” (Bartlett, 2014).

Tuition costs, even after the TSP supplement, still deter some families from incurring any more childcare or educational expenses. This is what motivates parents like Chris Holland, the current chair of EEANS, the DSEPS parent support group. “Our mandate,” Holland says, “is to make sure that each child has that opportunity to learn in the way that best suits them” (Holland interview, 2015).



Easing the transition

“We’re always assessing whether a student is ready to “leave the nest.” This is a safe spot, a place where kids don’t have to worry about sticking out because of their challenges. But the idea is for them to eventually not need to be insulated and to be able to function in the wider world.”

- Pat Doherty, Head of Churchill Academy, [Hello Dartmouth.ca](http://HelloDartmouth.ca), March 3, 2015

Search for sustainability – Sweeping away the remaining barriers

The actual demand for special needs day schools far exceeds the number of enrolled students. Active parent advocates like David Sampson and Chris Holland testify to the obstacles facing prospective students and their families. Essentially, parents are left to discover the TSP on their own. Under the current special education delivery model, the TSP 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 refer students, albeit as “a last resort” in most cases. Overall, the TSP, after more than a decade, remains a best-kept secret. In the case of Holland, a Churchill Academy parent, he discovered its existence when stumbling upon Churchill during a search on the Internet (Holland, 2015).

The Nova Scotia Department of Education did produce an attractive TSP brochure in January 2012, which outlines the scope of the TSP, its eligibility guidelines, funding details and the DSEPS. NSDOE Special Education Consultant Annie Baert developed the brochure in collaboration with David Sampson, former chair of EEANS, and the designated special education schools. It was designed in response to parental concerns about the difficulties acquiring information at the school level about TSP and the DSEPS. During meetings with Department of Education officials in late 2011, Sampson received assurances that the brochures would be distributed and readily available in the schools (Sampson, 2015). While it is posted on the Department of Education Web site, it does not appear to have made it into the schools. “We had brochures created,” Holland reports, “and none can be found in the schools” (Holland, 2015).

The TSP is gradually gaining acceptance one school at a time in Nova Scotia. An IPP assessment or a principal’s letter testifying to eligibility is easier to obtain in provincial



schools, but it still varies from board to board and even school to school. The Head of Bridgeway Academy, Lucinda Low, initially found that the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board (CCRSB) principals were reticent to identify and recommend students for the special program. Three years later, she reports that many of the referrals are coming from Pictou County schools on the eastern frontier of the CCRSB. With the opening of the Bridgeway satellite campus in September 2012 in Yarmouth, Low is also seeing more response from parents in the Tri-County Regional School Board district in southwest Nova Scotia (Low interview, 2015). Two of the DSEPS heads, Pat Doherty of Churchill and Peter Coll of Landmark East, see improvements in the responsiveness of schools that are familiar with the TSP, and they appreciate the efforts of Baert and NSDOE staff in streamlining the approvals process (Doherty 2015; Coll 2015).

Building acceptance for the TSP is proving to be an arduous process. Students and families in crisis still find the wait time interminable, especially for those unable to afford private psychological assessments. School principals have considerable discretion in deciding when and if IPPs are conducted in their schools. A delay of six months is expected, and some take longer. Securing one in some schools remains

Students and families in crisis still find the wait time interminable, especially for those unable to afford private psychological assessments.

next to impossible (Sampson, 2015; Low, 2015). Rural schools with declining enrollment can pose difficulties because they are the most reluctant to part with students (Low, 2015). All of these factors contribute to the relatively low number of students who qualify for the TSP and to attendance at DSEPS in Nova Scotia.

The DSEPS are gradually winning over parent and families. Enrolling a child in a special education school is no one's first choice, but it can be an educational lifeline for students struggling with severe learning challenges. Schools like Bridgeway Academy can play a crucial role in "getting through" to those who are learning challenged, and they do not pretend to be a "forever school" (Bridgeway Academy, 2015). Allowing some students to stay beyond the "short-term transition" has also relieved the pressure on dozens of families. The DSEPS, for the most part, are doing a good job educating a hard-to-serve student clientele. Most students surveyed at the DSEPS during the 2009 TSP Review were very positive about their educational experiences, and the vast majority of parents claimed that the schools had "saved their children" (TSP Review 2009, 106-110, 55-67).

Having a "life-changing experience" tends to bond students and families to the schools. After a few years in such a school, benefitting from smaller classes and considerably more individual attention, going back to the district school can be upsetting, if not



frightening, for some students. Students transitioning back can experience a serious personal crisis, necessitating emergency medical and psychiatric care (Sampson, 2012). More recently, such cases are rare because of the greater flexibility in allowing students to stay on and the much improved student support that allows a successful transition back into regular schools (Doherty, 2015). Giving some enrolled students the option of funding to complete their high school studies at a DSEPS has definitely helped to relieve stress and anxiety in many families (Sampson, 2013, 2015).

Initial fears that allowing more access to DSEPS might open the floodgates have not materialized in Nova Scotia. “We’re always assessing whether a student is ready to “leave the nest,”” Doherty recently told Hello Dartmouth.ca. “This is a safe spot, a place where kids don’t have to worry about sticking out because of their challenges. But the idea is for them to eventually not need to be insulated and to be able to function in the wider world” (Watson, 2015).

The Nova Scotia model has stood the test of time, serving students with SLD well for more than a decade. Since September 2004, the TSP has aided hundreds of students and provided an educational lifeline for their families. It exists today as a provincial program supported by successive provincial governments and under its own regulations. Back in November 2007, then Liberal education critic, Leo Glavine, proposed a private member’s bill to amend the *Education Act* and enshrine “support for special needs students” attending “special-education private schools” (Nova Scotia, Bill No. 35, 2007). The bill died on the order paper, but Minister of Education Karen Casey rejected a Ministerial Review recommending cancellation of the TSP and commissioned a new study that resulted in the ultimate retention of the TSP.

Supporters of the special education schools only want what they have discovered is best for their child. They are seeking better, more appropriate alternatives and have no desire to see any children “stigmatized” or “segregated” from others against their will, especially those with physical disabilities or severe mental handicaps (Ryan, 2014). After two province-wide reviews and three successive governments, it may be time to take the next step in amending the Education Act and provide more certainty for students and families now benefitting from, and dependent upon, the TSP in Nova Scotia.



Looking ahead

“Integration does not work for every child. Let those it works for attend public school and allow those it doesn’t work for easier funded access to private specialized schools. It seems a simple, straightforward solution, doesn’t it?”

*- Parent of a DSEPS student,
testimonial to Nova Scotia TSP, 2012*

“Things began to change for the better (for my little boy) when he began to attend tutoring at Riverbend, and after two years of full-time classes there, he is performing well at his school work and is a happy confident child I have met parents of other children with similar learning difficulties who would benefit from the program ... who are not able to pay the fees.”

*- Current parent, Riverbend Community
School, April 16, 2015*

Unlocking the potential – Prospects for a bigger breakthrough

Nova Scotia has shown the way in initiating and solidifying its TSP, supporting 220 to 230 students with SLD and their families each year. That “lifeline program” has come to the rescue of the largest number of learning challenged students in the Halifax region, central Nova Scotia and southwest Nova Scotia.

While this support only reaches approximately two out of five students at severe risk, it represents an important breakthrough. Some estimates, based upon Statistics Canada data analysis, put the number of students in Atlantic Canada with identified LD at approximately 14,000. Whatever the actual number, the success of the Nova Scotia model provides us with a program that has achieved proven results. The cost of the Nova Scotia TSP, at \$2.4-million in 2014-2015, is a very wise investment when one considers the social and economic costs to society of students who never graduate from high school and end up going off track in life (NSDOE, 2015; Sampson, 2012).

Special education is a policy in a dynamic state of flux. New Brunswick’s 2012 report *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools* adopted a narrow focus and represented a missed opportunity (NBDECD, Porter and AuCoin, 2012). Some of its research findings, especially on alternative school programs, did raise serious questions about whether the existing “full inclusion” model could ever be retooled enough to serve the diverse and complex needs of today’s students. The core philosophy of



inclusion is almost universally accepted, but there is a growing awareness that the best schools “teach the way children learn” and that there is a place for specialized, intensive learning programs where provincial education authorities build a bigger tent and open the door to new program options within an even more inclusive system of education (Bennett, 2012NB; Wilson 2013).

All is not lost when better approaches to special education are flourishing elsewhere. While the 2012 New Brunswick Inclusive Education review merely perpetuated the status quo (Bennett and Gallagher, 2013), the recently formed New Brunswick government may be inclined to look at special education with a different set of eyes. It will require a new vision and nothing less than a provincial strategy to seed the needed educational innovation. If Nova Scotia is any indication, developing a full continuum of services will not happen overnight. Working in close partnership with school districts, teachers, the PCSPD, NBACL, LDANB, Facing Autism in New Brunswick and other advocacy groups, the province should build upon the initial success of Moncton’s Riverbend School (Riverbend Community School, 2015) and use it as a pilot school for building a network of alternative programs and schools to fill its service gap (Bennett, 2012NB, Recommendations).

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It is time for New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland/Labrador to join Nova Scotia in embracing the new paradigm in special education services. Leaders in the movement in Ontario, Alberta, the United Kingdom and many U.S. states are rethinking special education for the 21st century. Prominent educators such as Sir Ken Robinson have alerted us to the challenge of re-engineering education systems that promote conformity, uniformity and industrial habits of mind so that they foster creativity and innovation — and recognize individual learning differences (CBC Maritime Magazine, 2012).

Nova Scotia’s TSP leads the way in breaking the mould. Providing tuition subsidies in the form of per student grants (or vouchers) is 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 (Cole and Price, 2009; Henteleff, 2009). It follows, then, that students with LD and complex needs in neighbouring Atlantic provinces would be far better served by opening the door to new forms of schooling and utilizing evidence-based programs and interventions. The Nova Scotia TSP has proven that it can benefit hundreds of students with SLD and their families.



A New Vision

“We need more schools committed to the Riverbend School vision of The Three R’s: Rethinking education, Rebuilding self-confidence and Recognizing potential. It has to start somewhere.”

*- Rebecca Bulmer, Director,
Riverbend Community School,
April 3, 2015*

What it means to students

“I like Bridgeway. It’s very different in the way they teach you. I was terrible in math before, but now I am really good at it, especially in long division. It’s more one-on-one, so if I get stuck, they go step by step of how to do it so I understand The day goes pretty fast. If you finish your work you can read or listen to music and on Fridays it’s more of a fun day where we play games I’ve made a lot of friends and am able to talk to more people and larger groups.”

*- Tyler Burton, Grade 10 student at
Bridgeway Academy, Truro,
November 21, 2012*

Summary and recommendations

Over the past decade, Nova Scotia’s TSP has provided a much-needed educational lifeline for hundreds of at-risk children and youth. Severely challenged students from Grade 4 to Grade 12 struggling with learning deficits for two or more grades have found a home and reasonable success in one of Nova Scotia’s three DSEPS. After securing a psychological assessment and an IPP designation, some 180 to 230 students have qualified to receive TS and a supplement that covers 90 per cent of the tuition at one of the DSEPS. The DSEPS, for the most part, are doing a good job educating a hard-to-serve student clientele. Most students surveyed at the 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). The TSP forms an important component of a Nova Scotia system that supports all students, where they can learn best, in a more fully evolved continuum of services (Henteleff 2004; Cole and Price 2009).

With up to 14,000 students in the Atlantic region estimated to be struggling with severe learning challenges and complex needs, the regular classroom is clearly not the answer for all children. While inclusive education is the overriding philosophy and starting point for all children, modern school systems, acting upon independent best-practice research, are embracing a new paradigm founded upon providing “the



most enabling environment” for each child. Such a model supports parent choice and seeks to provide, wherever possible, a full continuum of service from total integration to resource classes to specialized program schools (Cole and Price, 2009). Instead of adding to the heavy responsibilities of regular teachers, this model allows for a broader range of placements with specialist teachers, access to professional resources, much smaller classes and time for true parent-teacher collaboration in meeting the students’ needs. No regular public school, especially in times of budgetary restraint, can provide the small class sizes and this level of intensive support for these high-needs students.

The up-front costs of a TSP, currently budgeted at \$2.4-million for 220 students, are a sound investment when one considers not only the comparable costs in the public system, but also the staggering long-term costs of not addressing the largely hidden problem. Statistics compiled by the LDAC, based upon North American studies, document the potential long-term costs to society. High school students with LD drop

The up-front costs of a TSP ... are a sound investment when one considers ... the staggering long-term costs of not addressing the largely hidden problem.

out of school at roughly twice the rate of regular students. Some 50 per cent of U.S. females with LD become mothers within three to five months of leaving high school. A series of Canadian studies of young offenders have shown that between 30 per cent and 70 per cent of that population has experienced learning difficulties, and

the cost of detaining them in 1998 was estimated to be \$100,000 a year. In 1995, Correctional Service Canada reported that 45.6 per cent of adult inmates with LD had previous youth court records. A more recent Ontario Ministry of Labour study found that adults with LD typically hold a job for only three months and are most likely terminated for social skills deficits, not lack of job skills (Warwick LDAC, 2010). In short, investing now in high-risk students saves society thousands more in the costs of supporting high school dropouts and marginalized youth who become dependent upon social assistance, burden the health care system and populate our prisons.

Every Nova Scotia DSEPS success story produces not only productive citizens and happier families, but also reduces potential long-term social and economic costs for the provinces. Specialized LD schools like Moncton’s Riverbend Community School deserve the opportunity to be recognized and, with tuition support, would only help broaden accessibility in other provinces. Providing a lifeline for our most vulnerable children and youth simply makes common sense all around for students, families and the province.



Recommendations for Atlantic Canada

Recommendation 1

The Departments of Education and Early Child Development in New Brunswick, Newfoundland/Labrador and Prince Edward Island initiate studies of the Nova Scotia TSP and the lessons it provides in expanding the range and scope of the existing continuum of service for children with severe disabilities and complex needs.

Recommendation 2

The recently elected New Brunswick government takes a closer look at Riverbend Community School and considers establishing it as a provincial pilot alternative school (Grades 4-9) that utilizes public-private partnerships and offers specialized, intensive evidence-based programs for children and teens with SLD and complex needs.

Recommendation 3

Departments of Education outside of Nova Scotia support existing independent schools like Riverbend Community School and/or establish pilot special education schools committed to providing children with “the most enabling” learning environments that are appropriate to their needs.

Recommendation 4

Education Departments outside of Nova Scotia, working with school districts, the full range of special education groups and system partners, assess the costs and benefits of adopting a transfer-of-fees funding formula modelled on the TSP and consider allocating \$1.5-million in tuition support for the first 100 students deemed to be in need of such intensive, all-day learning support.

Recommendation 5

All school districts and boards develop closer partnerships with special education advocacy groups and regular day schools and future special schools to enable smoother transitions and to ensure that students with LD do not slip through the cracks in the system.



Recommendation 6

The university faculties of education, serving both the Anglophone and francophone communities, introduce expanded special education training programs (with part-time and evening sessions) specifically for current and prospective special education program teachers.

Recommendation 7

The Departments of Education, including Nova Scotia's, develop a more explicit continuum of service model, including self-contained classes and special education alternative schools as well as a province-wide communications strategy to promote awareness of such schools and the application process for TSP subsidy eligibility.

Recommendation 8

The province of Nova Scotia takes the lead in reforming the *Education Act* to formally recognize the rights of students with diagnosed SLD to access special education program schools. The province distributes information about the TSP in every public school in the system. This will continue the process of modelling best practices for neighbouring provinces.



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