



Building a Bigger Tent

Serving all special needs students better in New Brunswick's inclusive education system

Dr. Paul W. Bennett

June 2012

Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

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Brunswick's inclusive education system**

DR. PAUL W. BENNETT

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA

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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.

Introduction

Widening the Lens to Better Serve All Special Needs Kids

“Inclusion within the regular classroom is and should be the starting point for all children – and students and teachers must have the appropriate support to succeed within the regular setting. But an inclusive education system recognizes the need for flexibility, engagement and outside the box thinking.”

-Hon. Jody Carr, Minister of Education and Early Child Development,
Government of New Brunswick, 6 June 2012.

Striving for the “full inclusion” of all students in the publicly-funded school system is a most worthy goal, but it remains an illusion for far too many students in New Brunswick schools. Over the past five years, it has become increasingly clear that the regular classroom is not the most enabling learning environment for all students, especially those with severe learning disabilities or complex needs. One in ten Canadians reportedly suffers from some kind of learning disability and between 2 % and 4% of New Brunswick’s public school students, numbering from 2,100 to 4,200, are struggling at school with serious learning challenges.

Some 1,238 of New Brunswick’s 74,579 Anglophone public school students have now been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and many already require significant learning supports. (NB EECD, 2012). Rescuing and properly educating special needs kids with severe learning disabilities and autism is proving a significant challenge in the province’s regular Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools.

The recent Inclusive Education review report, *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools*, released on June 5, 2012, may have created an opening for some innovative thinking. While Education Minister Jody Carr pledged to spend some \$62 million more on Special Education over the next three years, it was essentially earmarked for more administration, teachers, and staff to advance the long-established public agenda. (CBC News NB, 5 June 2012). Reading between the lines, however, it is becoming clear that the Minister and his Department are coming to terms with the limits of the current inclusive education system and beginning to acknowledge that not every student can be accommodated in the regular classroom setting, particularly in Grades 9 to 12. Alternative programs and self-standing centres for severely challenged students have now materialized to fill an important need, with or without official sanction, in most school districts. While the report’s authors continue to pursue a strategy of containment and regulation, Minister Carr sounds more open to looking at widening the lens and seeking ways to better serve the neediest children with severe learning disabilities and complex needs. “A small number of students may need to spend time outside of a regular classroom for a short time, or in some cases, a longer time,” he wrote in a recent online post. “There should be a goal to assist students (to) move back to the regular classroom when this can be achieved.”

After some 25 years of “official inclusion” co-authors Gordon Porter and Angela Aucoin recognize that “we have yet to see the implementation of inclusive education on a systematic basis across the province.” (NB ECED 2012, *Strengthening Inclusion*, 145). On the surface, they seem to have convinced the David Alward government that “transforming the thinking of leaders,” supplied with more funding and personnel, will now do the trick. Their report does acknowledge the existence, flying below the radar, of “some form of alternative education” across school districts for high needs kids, K to 8, including stand-

alone alternative sites, self-contained classes, and “life skills courses.” Over 1 per cent of New Brunswick’s public school students, numbering 1,000 or so, are in alternative education programs, more heavily concentrated in D15 – Dalhousie (2.2%), D2- Moncton (1.9%), and D8 – Saint John (1.6%). (NB ECED 2012, Strengthening Inclusion, 50-51). There are also unmistakable signs, in the districts and the schools, of a growing willingness to “think outside the box” and some potential, at least, to expand the tent to serve everyone, however they learn, wherever they learn best.

Inclusion is well established as the guiding philosophy for the education system. Since the adoption of Wayne MacKay’s 2006 report on Inclusive Education, the province has pursued “full inclusion” for all public school students with a focus on concentrating Special Education services in neighbourhood schools. The New Brunswick Education and Early Child Development Department, working closely with Gordon Porter’s Inclusive Education Initiative and the New Brunswick Association for Community Living (NBACL), has turned the province into a virtual social laboratory for testing the limits of inclusion for all students whatever their learning abilities.

Over the past ten years, New Brunswick has emerged, among Canada’s provinces, as the undisputed champion in promoting “inclusive education,” seeking to accommodate all students, including those with autism and severe learning disabilities, in regular classrooms. In 2001, some 72 % of New Brunswick’s 5 to 14 year old students with learning disabilities were in regular classes, second only to Prince Edward Island among the provinces. Since 2006, the Department has become closely aligned with the NBACL, to the point where their websites virtually mirror one another. Vocal critics of the Full Inclusion Model, like Fredericton autism advocate Harold L. Doherty, charge that “extreme inclusionists” have imposed a “philosophy-based” regime and turned a blind eye to “evidence-based research” showing that students with “complex needs” are being marginalized and eventually left by the wayside. (Doherty 2010-12)

New Brunswick has a fairly centralized K-12 public school system, albeit one divided into two distinct sectors, anglophone and francophone. Compared to New Brunswick, educational governance in Nova Scotia is more distributed and so is the provision of Special Education services for students. There a small number of private, independent Special Education 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.

Parents, students, and families deserve a wider range of school choices and options in New Brunswick. It’s already happening in Nova Scotia as well as in other provinces such as Ontario and Alberta. The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP), initiated in September 2004, provides an option for students with special needs who cannot be served at their local public school. It was 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 which 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.

A critical learning gap now exists in New Brunswick’s range of Special Education services for students. Inclusive education should continue to be the overriding philosophy, but the spanking new 2012 report confirms that New Brunswick has yet to fully accept that the regular classroom is not the best, most enabling environment for every student. This AIMS research report assesses that province’s implementation of the restrictive Inclusive Education model, identifies a hole in the system of student support services, and examines the pent-up demand for a full continuum of service, from mainstreaming

to self-contained classes to special needs schools. It calls for an independent review of New Brunswick Special Education Services, seeking to assess the current demand for a wider range of choice and alternatives to the “one-size-fits-all” system.

With the recent release of the 2012 Inclusive Education review report, it’s the right time to address the bigger questions raised by the relentless pursuit of “the fully inclusive classroom.” Looking through a wider lens, the limitations of the universal, all-inclusive K-12 regular classroom become more apparent and so do the opportunities to enlarge the tent in public education. With Special Education policy in a state of flux everywhere, this AIMS research report challenges the province to completely “rethink” its policy, to look beyond its provincial borders and to take a close look at Nova Scotia’s service delivery model, including more specialized support programs and alternative Special Education schools. Nova Scotia’s ground-breaking Tuition Support Program (TSP) has just been renewed and is rendering private special education schools much more accessible to ordinary families with severely learning challenged children.

Pouring more funding into the current New Brunswick model will not likely yield better outcomes for the province’s most severely disabled learners. There is a compelling case to be made for re-engineering New Brunswick Special Education policy, for giving parents with special needs kids more options, and for extending an educational lifeline to hundreds of students currently marginalized in the public school system. In the wake of the recent narrowly circumscribed review, it’s high time that New Brunswick stepped back with a wider lens, started listening more to those currently locked in a system designed by theorists, in the interests of promoting a better educational environment for teachers and students alike.

The “Full Inclusion” Controversy

How Inclusive is the System?

“You people should be thankful for what you have.”

-Gordon Porter, Chair, New Brunswick Human Rights Commission,
responding to Autism NB Advocate Harold Doherty, Fredericton, 2005.

“For years, the dominant ‘everybody in the mainstream classroom’ approach pushed hard the New Brunswick Association for Community Living and by Gordon Porter...has held sway in New Brunswick. This approach does not reflect the research literature, or the experience of families like ours, which says that not ALL students with autism belong in the mainstream classroom.”

-Harold Doherty,
Facing Autism in New Brunswick Blog, June 28, 2010.

“Alternative education programs should not be an option for students in K-8...Segregated, self-contained classes and life skills programs for students with exceptionalities should not be an option at any grade level, K-12.”

-Gordon Porter and Angela Aucoin,
Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools, June 2012, p. 165.

New Brunswick’s simmering controversy over inclusive education boiled over in mid-April 2012 on a widely-aired CBC Morning Radio show. Fredericton lawyer and parent advocate Harold L. Doherty, curator of the Facing Autism in New Brunswick Blog, reacting to recent comments made by Gordon Porter, former head of New Brunswick’s Human Rights Commission, called into question the merits of what he termed “the Department of Education’s extreme inclusion model.” The father of an autistic teen disrupted the relative calm in the lead-up to the release of a major five-year provincial review of Inclusive Education. “I believe that the kind of evidence-based intervention that we need for our children, in some cases children with autism, is absolutely necessary and to deny it is a denial of the human rights, basically, of children like mine.” (CBC News New Brunswick, 17 April 2012)

Porter, a prime architect of the Full Inclusion model, had been appointed to conduct the review of that initiative. In December of 2011, he left no doubt where he stood on Inclusive Education for all. On the Canadian Education Association Blog, Porter expressed firm and unqualified support for “full inclusion” as essential to his determined 30-year-long campaign to “achieve equity for kids with intellectual disabilities in Canadian schools.” “Leadership is the issue,” he wrote, while lamenting the fact that some of Canada’s largest school districts were not only maintaining but actually increasing “the number of students in self-contained special education.” (Porter, CEA Blog, 2011) Some interventions in the school system, according to Porter, resulted in segregation and now posed a threat to inclusive education.

Doherty dismissed Porter’s fears and claimed that his whole approach was based upon “philosophy rather than sound evidence.” Over the previous decade, he defended the school system for adopting “evidence-based interventions” and recognizing the limits of inclusion. “We had a full inclusion model, I call it ‘extreme,’ because it puts everybody in the classroom regardless of the challenges they face.... In my son’s case, when that was initially in place, that meant that he was in the mainstream classroom and he

would come home every day with bite marks on his hands and wrists because some autistic children cannot function in the mainstream classroom. They're overwhelmed." (CBC News, 17 April 2012)

Porter rose to that challenge the very next morning on the same CBC Radio program. "Inclusive education," he said, "is still the right approach for students with special needs." In support of his claim, he cited a new book that he himself had co-authored in 2011 entitled *Exploring Inclusive Education Practices Through Professional Inquiry*, and featuring 25 different success stories in "making inclusion work." (Porter *Inclusive Practices*, 2011) He claimed that New Brunswick teachers were in favour of inclusion, but noted that "both teachers and parents need to work together to make sure that we do things appropriately and effectively." The role of advocacy groups, like the influential NB Association for Community Living, was not to dictate public policy, but rather to provide "a vision and to get things started."

Doherty is simply the most vocal critic of Porter and the New Brunswick-based Inclusive Education movement. For years, the Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick (LDANB) has been lukewarm to the militancy of the inclusionists. A long-time LDANB supporter, Fabienne MacKay, expresses the concerns in a quieter, more diplomatic fashion. While LDANB supports the general inclusion philosophy, they are nervous about the recent adoption of a Universal Design Model for inclusive classrooms and strongly opposed a 2010 plan to phase-out Special Education Plans (SEPs) for students with learning disabilities. (LDANB, 2011) "It's a philosophy, not a teaching method," MacKay says, and it causes "additional stress on already overburdened regular classroom teachers." Why do many parents simply accept the status quo? Parents of students with learning disabilities know that, in her words, "if you want services for your kids, do not rock the boat." (Fabienne MacKay Interview)

New Brunswick's Inclusive Education movement has faced nagging criticism since its inception. One of the founders of the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC), Yude M. Henteleff, set out the classic argument at a November 2004 National Summit on Inclusive Education. It was neatly captured in the paper's title, "The Fully Inclusive Classroom is Only One of the Ways to Meet the Best Interests of the Special Needs Child." After surveying the range of special education "exceptionalities" affecting between 100,000 and 170,000 children, the Winnipeg lawyer disputed the claims of the inclusionists. "It should be abundantly clear," he concluded, "that for children who suffer from emotional, mental, behavioural, cognitive, sensory, physical, expressive language, visual and auditory difficulties (and often a combination of the foregoing), it is simply not possible to meet their diverse needs in one environment. The shoe simply cannot fit all." (Henteleff 2004, 1- 2)

The central tenet of Inclusive Education Canada, headed by Gordon Porter, is that full inclusion is now part of our human rights tradition. Porter and the inclusionists fervently believe that the policy is fully in line with Canada's legal framework of human rights, and embodied in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Stemming from such a belief, the only real challenge is to transform "diversity, equity and inclusion... from theory into practice." (Porter, *Inclusive Education Canada* 2009). That does not leave much room for consideration of expanding the continuum of service to include specialized programs, or special education schools.

Critics of the New Brunswick system counter that inclusion in mainstream classrooms has its realistic limits. Since not all students, especially those with severe disabilities and complex needs, cannot be accommodated, Porter and his NBACL supporters are essentially "star gazing" and driven by a blinding idealism. The LDAC's Henteleff put it best: "Schools being a welcoming place regardless of gender, ethnicity, colour, religion, physical or mental condition, namely inclusivity, is far different from what is described as 'full inclusion' in the general classroom. Full inclusion fall short of guaranteeing equality."

Expecting all students, regardless of their disabilities, to be serviced in a regular classroom actually denies them access to what Henteleff termed “the most enabling environment for special needs children.” (Henteleff 2004, 2-3; Naylor CTF 2005)

Since a 2006 provincial report on Inclusive Education by Dalhousie law professor Wayne MacKay, New Brunswick has forged ahead with a systematic inclusion model, while other Canadian provinces have shown a marked tendency toward expanding the range of Special Education program options and even tax-supported special schools. The province is officially “inclusive” with overarching principles (mirroring those of the NBACL) that reinforce the commitment to universality, diversity, and equity (NB Education 2009, 1-2; NBACL 2012). Under Premier David Alward’s government, “full inclusion” advocates now also enjoy unprecedented political influence (IEC, Education Watch, Spring 2012).

New Brunswick’s pursuit of “fully inclusive” regular classrooms is now at odds with Special Education trends across Canada, in Great Britain, and the United States. From 1963 onwards, the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, now the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, has 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) The Canadian Association for Learning Disabilities (LDAC) continues to support a more balanced model favouring “inclusion” and “integration” – and accepting the need for a full continuum of service from regular classrooms to self-contained classes to specialized school programs (LDAC 2005 and 2012).

The province’s Maritime neighbour, Nova Scotia, has waived on full, universal, systematic inclusion and recently demonstrated an openness to more specialized programs and schools, as a supplement to the mainstream classroom (NS Education TSP 2012).

Since the late 1970s, a few small, independently-run schools for Special Needs children have continued to operate, mostly without public funding support. The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP), initiated in September 2004, provided an option for students with special needs who could be served at their local public school. It was 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 which 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 (Bennett, A Provincial Lifeline, 2012)

Special education support services in the United States are not only all over the map in philosophy, but also in a state of tremendous flux. Full inclusion models have been implemented in particular states and school districts, but it has been highly dependent upon the funding provisions rather than any overarching philosophy (Scull and Winkler 2011).

In the United Kingdom, the pendulum has swung decidedly against universal inclusionist models. In 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron went so far as to issue a pledge to “reverse the bias towards inclusion.” A March 2011 Green Paper, entitled Support and aspiration, honoured that promise by calling for significant change in the provision of special education and disability services. It proposed “a radically different system to support better life outcomes for young people,” giving parents more control, and transferring power from centralized, bureaucratic administration to “professionals on the front line and to local communities.” (Department for Education, Support and aspiration, 2011, 4-5)

Special education models of delivery are being totally re-examined everywhere, it seems, except in New Brunswick. 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 lamented the fact that special education research demonstrates only 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 under 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.

Levin's report dared to question the status quo in Nova Scotia special education services. He claimed that the system should – above all -- ensure that, if at all possible, 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 with its limited range of options was also in need of major reform.

The current reality is that hundreds of students in New Brunswicks's cities, towns and villages merely languish on the margins of the system, frequently missing classes, staying home, and counting the days until they can quit school. Pretending that all children and teens with learning disabilities are being equally served can and does have significant longer-term social costs. With the exception of the LDANB website, unearthing data on the extent of the challenges in New Brunswick is next to impossible. The best we can do is to cite evidence from other jurisdictions and make a few logical assumptions.

The social science research data is consistent, and much of it likely applies to New Brunswick. 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)

The New Brunswick Porter –Aucoin report narrowly focused on how to implement the current Inclusive Education model, so it merely re-affirmed the status quo. Most of the research focussed on the need for additional resources within the narrow confines of the province. It's time to widen the lens and to look at

those marginalized by the existing system. New Brunswickers should be asking if this is ‘good enough’ given the learning and life challenges facing students with severe learning disabilities and complex needs.

New Brunswick's Special Education Services

A Full Inclusion Impact Analysis

“New Brunswick is seen as a leader in the area of school inclusion both nationally and internationally. The different education stakeholders and the general public support the principle of inclusion, and no one wants to turn back.”

-Pierre Dumas, “Historical Outlook,” in A. Wayne MacKay, *Inclusive Education*, New Brunswick Education (January 2006), p. 7.

Wayne MacKay’s report on *Inclusive Education, Connecting Care and Challenge: Tapping our Human Potential*, unveiled in January 2006, was in many ways, a visionary plan. (NB Education, MacKay 2006) Its principal author was an esteemed lawyer of constitutional law with a deep commitment to advancing human rights. In conducting the review, he was extremely conscious of the need to support children with special needs and to protect their rights to a decent public education. New Brunswick was, even in 2005-05, still a province with a checkered past in Special Education, one where (until the mid-1980s) public expenditures on children with special needs was severely rationed and determined mostly by budgetary considerations. (Dumas in MacKay, 2006, Appendix K, 1-7) MacKay’s goal was to advance Special Education services and the Inclusive Education model would be the vehicle for moving the province forward and continuing to build a “needs-based” provincial system.

MacKay’s report started with the core assumption that the “full inclusion” system was the best of all possible worlds. He and his co-collaborators saw New Brunswick as a beacon in the struggle to advance universal, systematic inclusionism. Former New Brunswick education official Pierre Dumas is one such collaborator. Heavily cited by MacKay, Dumas wrote two supporting documents that are included as appendices to the main MacKay report in 2006. According to Dumas, “there are no more special classes or institutions, and all students are enrolled in a regular class at a public school. New Brunswick is seen as a leader in the area of school inclusion both nationally and internationally. The different education stakeholders and the general public support the principle of inclusion, and no one wants to turn back. Moreover, certain schools and schools (sic) districts showed that it was possible to achieve excellence in education while practising inclusion.”

Dumas and MacKay still saw threatening forces on the horizon. Despite the praise lavished on New Brunswick’s inclusionist philosophy, they saw the public school system, both the Anglophone and Francophone sectors, beset by “major difficulties.” It was being criticized for its “poor performance” on national and international tests and “some place the blame for that on the inclusion of exceptional students.” School administrators were already reporting “a growing increase in the number of exceptional students, particularly those with severe behaviour problems.” Both administrators and the teachers’ associations were deploring “the lack of human and financial resources to respond adequately to the needs of exceptional students.” Teaching in inclusive classrooms was becoming a tremendous challenge for regular teachers. Their teacher associations were registering great concern about “the workload of regular classroom teachers, the high number of exceptional students in the same class, the number of meetings and case conferences, and the lack of professional training.” (Dumas in MacKay, Appendix K, 7-8)

The MacKay report was essentially a call to stay the course and to ride out the storm of quality education reform. An earlier government report, written in 2002 and entitled *Quality Schools, High Results*, was perceived as a threat to full inclusion in regular classrooms, as were provincial initiatives designed to measure student performance levels. A proposed Grade 2 provincial test in reading and writing was also identified as a potential problem, as was the prospect of scarce resources being invested in early childhood education programs. Surveying past reform efforts since the Schools Act of 1987 engendered little hope. “When we analyze today’s situation,” Dumas concluded, “we see that the problems remain the same.” (Dumas in MacKay 2006, Appendix K, 8-9)

MacKay’s report re-affirmed support for “full inclusion” and concentrated on the challenge of “making the inclusive classroom work” for all students. It was a noble project, especially given the budget limitations and undercurrent of resistance from teachers, voiced through the teachers associations. The principal author was, he acknowledged, heavily influenced by a 2005 visit to Finland where he examined a high performing system without an extensive testing and accountability program. While he insisted that “the concept of inclusion” enjoyed “widespread acceptance,” he was acutely aware that there was “much less consensus on how it can be effectively delivered in New Brunswick schools.” The problem, as MacKay defined it, was the obvious gap between theory and actual classroom practice. The whole project of Inclusive Education, he feared, could be undermined by contrary practice and the resulting loss of all credibility. If there was one consistent message, it was that New Brunswick needed to plow ahead with Inclusive Education, focusing on classroom supports, and to invest more of the Education budget in the initiative. (NB Education, MacKay 2006, 61-2).

Five years later, the impact of the MacKay report still needs to be surveyed, analyzed and properly assessed, even after the release of the Porter Aucoin analysis. The current Five-Year Review, unlike MacKay’s commissioned report, was not “a stand-alone and independent study,” but rather the work of passionate advocates operating under the aegis of Inclusive Education Canada (Inclusive Education Canada 2012). Given the parameters of the review, that overall critical assessment will fall to others. When and if that happens, this report will identify a few vitally important qualitative and financial issues that need to be looked at in more objective fashion.

Assessing the scope and cost of Special Education in New Brunswick is not an easy task, since the hard data is either buried in Department of Education annual reports or only accessible through other governments or organizations. Between 2000 and 2010, the New Brunswick K-12 student enrolment slid from 124, 942 to 104,421 students, a decline of 20,521 or 16.4 per cent. During that period, total Education Department expenditures rose from \$730, 335,700 to \$ 984,721,200, an increase of \$254, 385, 500 or 25.8 per cent. (NB Education, Annual Reports, 2000-01, 2006-07, and 2010-11) No cost estimates for Special Education services in New Brunswick are published or disclosed, but estimates are possible, given the established yardsticks. A Statistics Canada study, published in May 2007, confirmed that some 72 % of all New Brunswick students(ages 5 to 14) with learning disabilities were being educated in regular school classes, second only to Prince Edward Island among the provinces (Kohen et al., 2007)

Across the United States, a 2001 Fordham Institute study estimated that some 13.1% of all students are designated SPED students, accounting for 21 per cent of all education spending (Scull and Winkler 2011, 1 and 22) For his Nova Scotia review, Dr. Ben Levin estimated that 15 % of Nova Scotia’s students in 2010-11 might be considered in that category. (Levin 2011, 11) For New Brunswick, the figures may well be lower, but it’s reasonable to assume that since 2006 the province has invested some 20% annually in Special Education Services, boosting spending from an estimated \$167 million to \$197 million. That is quite an investment and one that governments across North America are now assessing more closely in terms of its net benefits for students and families as well as taxpayers.

A review of Special Education Indicators, compiled for this study, provides a handy general overview of the impact of the MacKay report on the New Brunswick system. Constructed from Department of Education Annual Reports and Summary Statistics from 2000-01 to 2010-11, it is possible to identify a few notable trends in public spending and allocation of human resources. This task is made more difficult by the near absence of any student enrollment or financial data in MaKay’s report and the total absence of any cost analysis in the 2012 Porter-Aucoin review. The MacKay study was preoccupied with seeking a change in the funding model for meeting the needs of exceptional students. A sub-report looking at funding, prepared by Grant Thornton, was prepared to support a recommendation to move from the former census-based model (funding based upon student numbers) to a “hybrid model” incorporating the significant differences in costs associated with the “severity of disabilities.” (NB Education, MacKay, 20-21; Grant Thornton, 2005) If the Department is tracking student numbers and costs by type of disability, it is not being publicly disclosed in the province. The following table includes some estimates based on available national benchmarks.

FIGURE 1 –Special Education Indicators, New Brunswick 2000-01 to 2010-11

Key Indicator	School Year 2000-2001	School Year 2006-2007	School Year 2010-11	Per Cent Change 2006 to 2010
Student Population (K-12)	124,942	112,013	104,421	-6.7 %
Education Expenditures (\$K)	730,074	836,625	984,721	+ 17.7 %
Special Education Enrolment*	16,242*	14,561*	15,663*	+ 7.6 %
Number of Educators	7,575.3	7,735.5	7,869.3	+ 1.7%
Number of Regular Teachers	6,060	5,885.5	6,028	+ 2.4 %
Total Teachers, All Types	NA	NA	7,130.2	NA
Student/Educator Ratio	16.4	14.5	13.3	- 8.2 %
Number of Teaching Assistants	1,093.8	1,945.6	2, 255.5	+15.9 %
Special Needs Resource Staff	NA	465.5	516.6	+11.0 %
School Learning Specialists	NA	81.6	94.3	+15.6%
Psychologists and Professionals	59.9	61.0	78.8	+29.2%
SE Student-Personnel Ratio	NA	NA	NA	NA
Cost per SE Student*	\$8,990*	\$11,491*	\$12,574*	+ 9.4%
*Estimates based upon Benchmarks				

Sources: New Brunswick Department of Education, *Annual Reports*, 2000-01, 2006-07, and 2010-11; Summary Statistics, School Years, 2006-07, 2010-11, and 2011-12; and Wayne MacKay, *Inclusive Education*, Executive Summary, January 2006, p. 9.

Since the MacKay report, Special Education (SPED) supports have generally increased in a shrinking K-12 school system and SPED has consumed a significantly larger share of education expenditures.

Between 2006 and 2010, the number of New Brunswick students designated for SPED services grew by an estimated 7.6 %, while the overall student numbers declined by 6.7%. The number of regular teachers only grew by 2.4%, while the complement of Teaching Assistants grew by 15.9%, to 2,255, double that of 2000-01. Every category of Special Education support staff rose by between 10% and 30 % over the five years. (Figure 1) As in Nova Scotia and Ontario, it became, far and away, the fastest growing component of the overall provincial education budget.

MacKay's support for the Inclusive Education model did generate more resources for Special Education, but it did not resolve all of the "major difficulties." The Premier's Council on the Status of Disabled Persons (PCSDP) Report Card, released in December 2010, highlighted a few of the holes in the continuum of services for learning disabled children. While it endorsed the MacKay report, the PCSDP reported that by June of 2009, 70 of his 155 recommendations had been completed, leaving 55 % of them at various stages of implementation. The lag in implementation warranted a B- grade on the Report Card. It was noted, however, that the new Alward government had been elected pledging an "updated action plan." (NB PCSDP Report Card, 2010, 29).

The PCSDP Report Card awarded the Department of Education mediocre grades on a few critical matters. Identification of students with a severe learning disability, and securing professional assessments was judged to take far longer than the recommended three months, warranting a C- grade. Serious complaints registered by parents with the New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate Bernard Richard about delays in securing interventions were not being addressed in a timely manner. Over the previous four years, the Department had also fallen short in providing "appropriate training to all staff and volunteers" so that they were capable of meeting the needs of students with disabilities, especially those on SEPs (Special Education Plans). Of particular note, the PCSPD Report Card gave the Department a C grade on its overall response to students with autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, and physical challenges., including deafness and blindness. It made no comment on whether "input from parents" had been welcomed and encouraged" as MacKay had urged in his report. (NB PCSPD 2010, 29-36).

Most of the concerns registered in the PCSDP 2010 Report Card echoed those being rather gently lodged by the LDANB and voiced by the Child and Youth Advocate in the NB Ombudsman's Office. The 2010 election of David Alward and his Conservative government signalled the coming of an austerity drive, raising fears of provincial budget cuts. (ALDNB, Reflexions, Winter 2011) A more recent Special Education policy initiative, sanctioned by the Alward government, only confirmed those fears. In 2010, the Department adopted a Universal Design for Learning (LDL) model for classroom inclusion and announced that it was phasing-out SEPs altogether (NB Education 2010). In a rare public protest, the ALDNB issued a stern formal statement opposing the gradual elimination of SEPS, while, at the same time, expressing support for the essential "UDL tenets and practices." "We believe," the ALDNB declared, "that it is the legal obligation of the Province to provide the 'specific' interventions for students learning disabilities based upon ongoing formative assessments." The ALDNB statement charged the Department with violating the New Brunswick Human Rights Code and contravening Section 12 of the Education Act guaranteeing a student designated as an "exceptional pupil" the right to a "special education program." Leaving the decision over whether the assessments are "justifiable" or "universal" was also a major bone of contention. (ALDNB, Reflexions, Winter 2011)

Ending SEPs for all students with "universal accommodations" was, according to ALDNB, totally unacceptable because it had been done summarily and without any prior consultation. It became obvious

to ALDNC's Fabienne MacKay that "vital early intervention and support programs" for persons with Learning Disabilities were about to "fall prey" to budget cuts. Full inclusion and UDL were not only "removing the rights of kids with learning disabilities," they were fast becoming "a cost effective way of providing Special Ed. services." (Fabienne MacKay Interview, 2012). Six months before the release of the Porter-Aucoin report, New Brunswick Student Services director Brian Kelly boasted in an interview that the number of students on SEPS had been slashed by some 5,000 since September 2010. "We found," he claimed, "a lot of soft SEPs." (Kelly Interview, 12 Dec 2011)

Pent-Up Demand For Alternative Special Education Program Options

New Brunswick's public school system, consisting of 317 Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools, seeks to accommodate its 104,421 students in 2011-12 in regular day programs implementing "full inclusion" with a new Universal Design for Learning (LDL) curriculum implementation strategy. (NB Education Summary Statistics, 2011-12; and CAST 2012). Since 2010, the Department has scaled back its full-out implementation of inclusion, recognizing that "systemic change takes time." "The central idea," NB Education's Gina St. Laurent insists, "is to focus all services in the local school." (Gina St. Laurent Interview, 2011). With increased numbers seeking access to SE services, however, some 17,000 students were estimated to be on SEPs by 2010-11. Inside the Department, most of the SEPs were considered to be "soft designations" that could be either eliminated or converted to "universal" classroom accommodations.

In the 2010-11 of a round of budget cuts, SEPs were eliminated for hundreds of students with learning disabilities formerly considered entitled to support services. Teacher aides, formerly termed "Teaching Assistants," were re-classified as "Educational Assistants" and essentially frozen at 2,232.3 FTEs in 2011-12. Shifts in Special Education Service delivery such as eliminating the SEPs achieved only modest cost savings, but were specifically designed to ease the burdens on hard pressed classroom teachers being asked to accommodate students with an incredibly wide range of special needs. "Getting rid of the SEPs," St. Laurent says, was about "reducing the meeting and reporting time, freeing teachers up to work more directly with kids and families." (St. Laurent Interview)

The dramatic shift away from SEPs appears to be an admission that New Brunswick's "full inclusion" model had become an administrative nightmare for over-stretched classroom teachers. Parents of students with learning disabilities and the ALDNB advocacy group were shocked because it flew in the face of the Premier's Council for People with Disabilities, which had called for such assessments to be improved and completed in a more timely fashion. (PCPD Report Card 2010). The ALDNB's Fabienne MacKay claimed that parents were essentially blind-sided and left to fend for themselves in advocating directly with their child's classroom teacher for any learning accommodations. (ALDNB, Reflexions, Fall 2011, 3) What started out as an idealistic plan to "build inclusive schools" was falling far short of parental expectations.

One in ten New Brunswick public school students, numbering as many as 10,400 school children, according to the ALDNB, suffers from some form of learning disabilities. With the gradual elimination of SEPs, most will be denied "special interventions" and a sizable number will be left to fend for themselves in regular classrooms, without access to additional supports. The province's universal, integrated service delivery model does not lend itself easily to flexible teaching arrangements, nor does it offer parents any other program options.

New Brunswick education authorities are, for the most part, in a state of denial when it comes to recognizing the shortcomings of the "full inclusion" model. Given the size of the New Brunswick school system, it can be estimated that some 2,000 students have severe learning challenges. Many (if not most) of those students will be struggling to keep their head above water, staying home regularly, or spending time in "isolation rooms." A few like Harold Doherty's autistic son, Conor, have fought for and secured a place in one of the few remaining self-contained high school classes. (Donkin, The Aquinian, 2011) The rest of those students with severe disabilities or complex needs are most likely languishing with unmet needs in a very busy classroom, normally full of distractions. What happens to kids who cannot keep up

with their classroom peers? One of the few with the courage to speak, former Deputy Minister Dennis Cochrane, provided a rather sad answer: “All too often, they’re sitting in the back of the classroom being attended to by a teaching assistant.” (Cochrane Interview, 2011)

A statistical table, prepared exclusively for this report, demonstrates the numbers of students who face learning challenges that are not currently being met in mainstream classrooms. Based upon established benchmarks, 10,442 out of New Brunswick’s 104,421 students likely have learning challenges. (Barrington Consulting Group, 2011, 15-16). Some 20% to 40% of those “special needs kids”, according to a 2011 Halifax consultant’s report, have a more acute form of learning disability that would potentially benefit from an intensive, full-day support program which is currently offered in three Nova Scotia special education schools, but nowhere in New Brunswick. It is in respect to the entire absence of an officially sanctioned spectrum of support that New Brunswick is “exceptional”. The table below suggests that there are a considerable number of New Brunswick students that could benefit from alternative programs or schools offering needed intensive, publicly-funded support services.

FIGURE 2 – Forecasted Demand for Specialized Programs or Schools, New Brunswick, 2010-11

School Districts	Total Enrolment 2010-2011 Year	Lower End Projected(2%)	Upper End Projected(4%)	Total LD Students Projected (10%)
Anglophone Districts				
D2 - Moncton	15,680	314	627	1,568
D6 - Rothesay	10,042	201	402	1,004
D8 – Saint John	11,571	231	463	1,157
D10 – St. Stephen	3,788	78	152	379
D14 - Woodstock	7,491	150	300	750
D15 - Dalhousie	3,371	67	135	337
D16 - Miramichi	5,606	112	224	561
D17 - Oromocto	4,889	98	196	489
D18- Fredericton	12,141	243	486	1,214
Francophone Districts				
D1 - Dieppe	7,854	157	314	785
D3 - Edmundston	5,803	116	232	580
D5 - Campbellton	4,892	98	196	489
D9 – Tracadie - Sheila	6,159	123	246	616
D11 - Richibouctou	5,134	103	205	513
TOTAL	104,421	2,088	4,177	10,442

Judging from the rising chorus of concern over the Full Inclusion Model and its curriculum step-child UDL, a pent-up demand for a fuller range of program options, including specialized schools, exists all over the province, in both Anglophone and Francophone school sectors. Since the closure of the Peter Pan Centre in Woodstock, NB, in 1983, the movement to close all special schools and institutions has virtually eliminated parental choice in seeking alternative programs. (Porter, IEC, Newswatch 2010). According to our estimates, some 4,940 of the 10,400 students with a learning disability would reside in the major urban Anglophone school districts surrounding Moncton, Fredericton, Saint John and Rothesay. (Figure 2) In those mostly urban districts, some 990 to 1970 students likely have more acute needs. In the Francophone sector, between 590 and 1,190 of the estimated 2,980 LD students would benefit from more intensive, all-day services. Applying the same statistical analysis, the numbers of potential students who would benefit from full-day LD services in the other Anglophone school districts would be from 78 to 152 in St. Stephen, from 150 to 300 in Woodstock, from 67 to 135 in Dalhousie, 112 to 224 in Miramichi, and from 98 to 196 in Oromocto. (Figure 2)

The spectrum of service in Special Education supports is much narrower in New Brunswick than in most if not all provinces in Canada. Without any special intensive programs or schools of any kind, parents and families of children with severe learning disabilities or complex needs not being met in regular schools have nowhere to turn for that critically needed support. Since the Child and Youth Advocate's 2008 report, *Connecting the Dots*, the problems of children and youth at-risk and the merits of "alternative educational settings" are now finally on the provincial public agenda. (Richard *Connecting the Dots* 2008, 99)

The Case for School Choice

Alternative Schools and Programs

Inclusive education is not only official policy in New Brunswick, it also forms the basis for an ingrained ideology. While Nova Scotia's Education Department embraces the same overriding philosophy, the pursuit of that goal does not foreclose on any and all other program options for parents or families of students with severe learning challenges. The current Provincial Review of Inclusive Education, headed by Gordon Porter and Angela Aucoin, promises to do little to change the existing condition in New Brunswick's rather rarified Special Education field. While most Canadian and American education departments are now "re-thinking" Special Education, there is no outward evidence of that trend in New Brunswick. (NS Education TSP Review, 2009; Bennett 2012; Scull and Winkler, 2011). Indeed, the New Brunswick approach shows all the signs of what British Prime Minister David Cameron called "the bias toward inclusion." (Department for Education, Support and aspiration, 2011)

Today New Brunswick's public school system is remarkably centralized, uniform, and inclusionist, almost in spite of its distinct Anglophone and Francophone sectors. For a system with some 100,000 K-12 students, it's rare to find virtually all of them educated in publicly-funded community schools. While the province does have some 19 independent, private schools, they only enrolled 955 students in 2011-12, representing 0.9% of the total school age population. Most of those independent schools, except for Rothesay-Netherwood School and Fredericton's Devon Park School, are exceedingly small, and many are Christian denominational in their orientation. None of those private schools is explicitly designed to provide a "lifeline" for children with severe learning disabilities (Monica LeBlanc, 12 December 2011).

The universal all-inclusive school is not always friendly to students who do not fit the mould. Periodic attempts to stamp out Resource Rooms and self-contained classes have generated quite a stir over the past decade. Ten years ago, DEC member William Forestall of Fredericton rallied in an attempt to save a Special Education Resource Room in Fredericton H.S. that was facing imminent closure. With the support of Marianne Stevens and the LDANB, he succeeded in October of 2001 in getting a reprieve halting the shutdown, citing Article 26.3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights granting parents "the right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (DEC 18 Minutes, 2001).

A few brave school reformers have joined with the ALDNB and local parent advocacy groups in challenging the New Brunswick regime of 'cookie cutter schools.' In January 2003, Forestall rose in defense of school choice on CBC Radio's Mainstreet show. The success of French immersion, he claimed, had tended to mask the total absence of alternative programs in the province's Anglophone sector. "It is the English program, and the lack of educational choice," he said, "that is really compounding our problems. Most people in New Brunswick don't realize that every province west of New Brunswick has a much, much broader range of educational choice open to all parents." (CPF CBC Transcript 2003).

When pressed by the CBC Radio show host, Forestall gave plenty of examples of the multiple choices for students and parents in most other Canadian provinces. "They'll fund independent schools (BC and Quebec), they'll fund parochial schools (Alberta and BC), they have separate school boards that compete with the public school boards (Ontario)... (This helps make sure) that the public school board is doing what every parent wants, not just the majority, but what every parent wants. And that way, every child learns in the best manner best suited to their abilities, talents and interests....Edmonton has 30 different

kinds of schools ...So children with interests, talents, and abilities can soak this in and choose the schools that best match their needs.” (CPF CBC Transcript 2003).

New Brunswick’s “full inclusion” model stands as a prime example of what Forestall and Saint John school reformer Donald Beyea deplored as a closed system denying parents the right to choose the best, most enabling school environment for their children. “Choice-based funding, “ Forestall pointed out in February 2008, “is available to over 92 per cent of Canadian students, in school systems that have secured some of the best educational outcomes in the world.” Citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26.3, he claimed that “funded school choice” was “a well-recognized human right” almost everywhere except in New Brunswick and Atlantic Canada. He went further: “Atlantic Canada’s education bureaucrats’ mastery is not successful student outcomes, but protecting their monopoly funded fiefdoms from the competitive checks and balances that define education in normal democratic societies.” (Forestall, 2008; Telegraph Journal, 2008).

Why are New Brunswick parents beginning to call for a wider range of school choices, particularly for special needs students? Simply because holes and cracks are beginning to appear in the universal, ‘one-size-fits-all’ inclusive school model. In late June 2010, Dee LeBlanc of Cocagne, NB, the distraught mother of a severely disabled daughter, issued a desperate cry for help. Her eight year-old daughter, Terry-Lynne, has complex needs, diagnosed as fetal alcohol syndrome, cerebral palsy, and epilepsy. Up until Grade 2, Terry-Lynne, coped reasonably well in a regular class with the extraordinary help of her teachers and other students’ teaching assistants. All that changed when she was 7 years of age and entered Grade 2. “She just didn’t get the help she needed,” LeBlanc says, “which brought her out-of-control and she just didn’t want to (do anything), no reading, no writing, no nothing.” Her tighter couldn’t keep up with the other kids in the class and became despondent. In LeBlanc’s words: “She felt very unwanted, useless. You have a seven-year-old come and look at you in your face and say, ‘I wish I was dead. I wish I was never born’...(and it’s only) Grade 2.” When her daughter was found in the hall with no one to help her go to the washroom, she pulled her out-of-school and has been home schooling her ever since. The whole ordeal shook Dee LeBlanc’s faith in the public school system and she went public with her heart wrenching story. She appeared on CBC News and appealed to the Department of Education to secure “more special needs training” for all teachers and assistants in the system. No one in the Department would comment on the deeply troubling turn-of-events. (CBC News, 23 June 2010)

The tragic story of Terry-Lynne LeBlanc did spark quite a public reaction. It generated a mountain of online comment, capturing the raw tenor of public opinion. Of the 39 mostly irate public comments, a clear majority (22 or 56.4%) blamed New Brunswick’s “full inclusion” model for the calamity. Only five people who posted (12.8%), expressed any support for the all-inclusive classroom in this particular case. Most significantly, only one in eight (12.8 %) held the teachers responsible and the comments tended to show sympathy for teachers attempting to be all-things-to-all students in New Brunswick’s regular classrooms. Many blamed the current delivery model for “dumping... another major responsibility on the schools.” (CBC News Online, 23 June 2010)

Terry-Lynne LeBlanc was only the most dramatic example of the shortcomings of the all- inclusive classroom. Earlier that same week, in June 2010, two young boys were removed from school by their families to protest the use of “isolation rooms,” employed by teachers giving unruly or disruptive kids a “time out” from regular class. A New Brunswick grandmother, Claire LaBelle of Moncton, pulled a 7-year-old autistic boy, Jean-Michel, out of his Grade 1 class when she saw him confined to an isolation room that she described as “a little jail.” School District 1 official Luc Lavoie said that all schools in that district had “time out rooms,” but told CBC News that they were “rarely used.” LaBelle, a trained social worker and Executive Director of the Greater Moncton Family Resource Centre, was not mollified by

such assurances. Since both of Jean-Michel's parents had full-time jobs, the grandmother was compelled to rearrange her work schedule to teach the boy from home, on a temporary basis. (CBC News, 21 June 2010). Another New Brunswick mother joined the June 2010 chorus of dissent and dismissed claims that the isolation rooms were used infrequently to support the inclusivist classroom model. Her 13-year old son, diagnosed with bipolar disorder and Asperger's syndrome, she insisted, had been put in the isolation room many times during his eight years in school. (CBC News, 23 June 2010).

Most New Brunswick parents do support the general philosophy of inclusion, but increasing numbers are also acutely aware of its limits. One such parent, "Jenny Anne," with a child in Grade 5 in 2009-10, expressed that concern, albeit without revealing her name, that of her child, or the school. That Grade 5 class, she claimed in an online comment, was disrupted several times a week by one boy's continual misbehaviour. Her child was regularly disturbed and upset by the episodes watching the disruptive child "tear things up" and being "taken to the safe room by the TA." When students in the class voiced their concerns, "intervention sessions," were attempted, but it continued almost every day for the year. She raised her concerns with the District, pointing out that her child deserved to be educated in "a safe learning environment." Finally, she simply gave up. "It does not matter what we say," she wrote, "it's the ONE child that needs to be accommodated, therefore HE gets to disrupt the class and the rest of the class feels unsafe..." (CBC News Online, 22 June 2010)

What British Prime Minister Cameron described as "the bias for inclusion" is ever-present in the New Brunswick school system. It is becoming abundantly clear, five years after Wayne MacKay's report, that "full inclusion" is simply not working for everyone. The New Brunswick Department of Education has plowed ahead with the "full inclusion" model, invested more resources into Special Education, supported the hiring of hundreds more teaching assistants (ACLNB, July 2004), and is now introducing a Universal Design for Learners (UDL) curriculum planning process. Signs of stress are appearing, as New Brunswick's regular classroom teachers shoulder more and more of the responsibility for supporting an incredibly diverse range of needs.irate parents and grandparents pulling severely disabled kids out of school and turning to home schooling is surely not part of the plan.

Parent activists like Harold Doherty of Autism Reality NB and his supporters are not about to be silenced and can no longer be simply ignored or dismissed as 'troublemakers.' With a shift in direction, New Brunswick can become a leader in autism services, building upon the success of Dr. Paul McDonnell's University of New Brunswick evidence-based intervention programs, but delivered in a far wider range of educational settings. (McDonnell CBC News 2010). Reasonable, fair-minded New Brunswick parents know that the inclusion model, in its purist form, is not working and needs to be completely reformed in ways that respect parents' rights to some control over the education of their children, and particularly those who will never "fit" into the prescribed mould. (Sandy Crux 2012).

A New Policy Option

Expand “Lifeline” Programs and Schools

Boosting spending on the current Inclusive Education system by \$62 million from 2012 to 2014 is not the real answer. Many New Brunswickers are whispering that it may be time to end the obvious bias in education policy towards a “full inclusion” model, particularly in the case of students with severe learning disabilities and complex needs. This AIMS report seeks to provoke a re-thinking of Special Education in New Brunswick and is intended to encourage New Brunswickers to embrace the positive policy initiatives sprouting in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, and elsewhere in North America. Inclusive education offers a hopeful, bracing vision; it also plays tricks on your mind. As presented by Gordon Porter and IEC, it’s a plan with appealing simplicity, designed to include everyone in regular community schools. After thirty-years of advances, the evidence is accumulating that (as in Nova Scotia) some students simply cannot “fit in” and are falling by the wayside. What good is an ‘all-inclusive school’ if hundreds of students are being marginalized and not getting the specialized support they need to become productive and contributing adults? Why are Special Education Plans (SEPs) being abandoned when they are the passport to other school options in other provinces? How are the current changes helping to make the system more inclusive? These are challenging questions, but they all point to one inescapable conclusion: It’s time to open up the New Brunswick school system and to provide parents and kids with a wider range of choice and a full ‘continuum of service’ so no one is left behind.

Nova Scotia has taken the lead in opening the door to new program options, while maintaining true to the essential principles of “inclusive education.” The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP), initiated in September 2004, provides an option for students with special needs who cannot be served at their local public school. It was 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 which 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. (NS Education, TSP 2012) It represents a real breakthrough, opening up access to a vitally important alternative school option. 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. (Bennett 2012)

Three private, independent schools, operating on four sites, now exist in Nova Scotia that are accredited DSEPS and fully 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.

The Tuition Support Program (TSP) is the critically important ingredient because it provides funding support, in the form of fees transfers, to make attending one of these schools a viable option for most Nova Scotia families. Currently, the Nova Scotia school system, with the TSP in place since September

2004, provides access to programs supplementing the regular mainstream schools. To be eligible for TSP support, students must possess a designated Individual Program Plan(IPP) or a suitable equivalent form of documentation. Today, the TSP 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. (Bennett 2012).

Specialized programs and schools are now recognized, once again, in most Canadian provinces as best practice for certain types of students with severe learning challenges or complex needs. 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; an 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)”

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 separate schools, Price and Cole’s literature review (2009) demonstrates 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, specialized separate schools, utilizing evidence-based interventions, do have a role in meeting “the diverse needs of students with LD across the school years” (Price and Cole 2009, 72-73)

Special education schools, such as those designated under the TSP, have a critical role to play in a fully evolved system meeting the needs of all students. The three designated DSEPS, Bridgeway Academy, Churchill Academy and Landmark East, have been thoroughly evaluated and came through Nova Scotia’s 2009 Tuition Support Program Review with flying colours on most counts. (Bennett 2012).

Work by 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. The overall feedback was fairly conclusive: the DSEPS, supported by the TSP, are not only rescuing struggling students, but likely saving lives. (NB Education TSP Review 2009) They were also found to be succeeding admirably in restoring the confidence of students currently marginalized by the regular public school system.

Supporting the private special education schools in Nova Scotia 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 than the publicly funded private option. 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 an 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).

New Brunswick's Alward government would be wise to take a harder look at the financial cost of trying to maintain the existing "full inclusion" model. Introducing the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) curriculum, trying to duplicate SE supports in every school, and maintaining a reserve army of 2,200 Education Assistants, can be a costly venture, especially if questions are being raised about its effectiveness in responding to the needs of those with the most severe difficulties and complex needs. Much of the growth in staffing costs in Special Education is driven by the labour-intensive, TA for every child, imperatives embedded in the all-inclusive regular classroom model. Eliminating all SEPs is a highly questionable move when it provides learning disabled students with vitally important documentation, needed by students transitioning to tertiary vocational schools, community colleges, and the universities. (PCSPD Report Card 2010).

Separate programs and schools for severely challenged students, properly accredited and regulated, can not only serve a wider range of students, but also do so at a more affordable cost to taxpayers. It's time for a major re-thinking of the Inclusive Education status quo in New Brunswick. Re-engineering the province's Special Education system is not only possible, it is becoming imperative. Better life outcomes for young New Brunswickers with learning challenges can, and will, be better achieved by widening the range of services – and ensuring that everyone has access to meaningful, rewarding learning experiences. (Henteleff 2009) It will also send out a powerful signal that New Brunswick's education authorities recognize the right of parents to choose the best school for their children, and transfer more of the decisions to front line teachers and to local communities.

Summary and Recommendations

Special education is an educational policy field in a dynamic state of flux. New Brunswick's 2012 report *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools* adopted a narrow focus and represents a missed opportunity. Some of its research findings, especially on alternative school programs, do raise serious questions about whether the existing "full inclusion" model can ever be re-tooled enough to serve the incredibly diverse and complex needs of today's students. The core philosophy of inclusion is now almost universally accepted, but there is a growing awareness that the best schools now "teach the way children learn" and recognize 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.

It's time for New Brunswick to join Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, the United Kingdom and many American states in re-thinking Special Education for the 21st century. Leading educators like Sir Ken Robinson have alerted us to the challenge of re-engineering education systems promoting 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 Tuition Support Program leads the way in breaking the mould. 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 and complex needs in New Brunswick would be far better served by opening the door to new forms of schooling, utilizing evidence-based programs and interventions. The Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP) has proven that it can work to the benefit of hundreds of students with severe learning disabilities and their families.

With the Inclusive Education review delivering more of the same approach, now is the time to take a look at New Brunswick Education and Early Child Development 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 and to begin working, in close partnership with school districts, teachers, the PCSPD, NBACL, LDANB, Autism NB, and other advocacy groups, to begin building the alternative programs and schools needed to meet the identified needs.

It is recommended that:

Recommendation 1:

The New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Child Development (EECD) initiate an independent commission with a clear mandate to "re-think Special Education for the 21st century" and to more carefully assess the recommendations of the *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools* report (June 2012) with reference to alternative school programs and, in the light of, best practice across North America and elsewhere around the world;

Recommendation 2:

The EECD Department initiate a study of the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (TSP) and the lessons its provides in expanding the range and scope of New Brunswick's continuum of service for children with severe disabilities and complex needs;

Recommendation 3:

The EECD Department set aside the Porter-Aucoin report's restrictive Alternative Education recommendations (11.1 to 11.2) and actively consider establishing model alternative schools (Grade 3 - 12), utilizing public-private partnerships, and offering specialized, intensive, evidence-based programs for children and teens with severe learning disabilities and complex needs;

Recommendation 4:

The Department, working with the ALDNB, Autism NB, NBACL, school districts, and system partners, assess the costs and benefits of adopting a transfer of fees funding formula, modelled after the Nova Scotia Tuition Support Program (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:

The Education Department suspend the planned elimination of Special Education Plans (SEPs), as recommended by the ALDNB, pending a full review of the decision;

Recommendation 6:

A full Provincial Review be conducted investigate identified concerns with the Universal Design for Learning (LDL) model implementation and the current Special Education identification, placement, and reporting system, focusing on the Individual Program Placement (IEP) and SEP process, including an audit of recent assessments on a district-by-board basis;

Recommendation 7:

The EECD Department contract the appropriate New Brunswick university faculties of education, serving both the anglophone and francophone communities, to introduce Special Education training programs (with part-time, evening sessions) specifically for current and prospective special education program teachers;

Recommendation 8:

All New Brunswick school districts be asked to develop closer partnerships with Special Education advocacy groups, and between regular day schools and future special schools, to enable smoother transitions and to ensure that students with learning disabilities do not slip through the cracks in the system;

Recommendation 9:

The EECD Department, working in collaboration with the Learning Disabilities Association, NB Association for Community Living, and Autism NB, develop a new continuum of service model, including self-contained classes and special education alternative schools, and a province-wide communications strategy to promote awareness of such schools and the application process for proposed TSP subsidies;

Recommendation 10:

The next full Provincial Review of Special Education, in 2017, focus on assessing the reformed system, including the effectiveness of special education alternative schools, independent teacher and parent opinion on student support services, and a study of the need for improved school-to-workplace apprenticeship programs.

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