

NEW BRUNSWICK LEARNING DISABILITIES SUMMIT

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The Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick
63 Peter Street, Moncton, N.B.
E1A 3W3
Phone /FAX : 506-383-5077

The Meighen Centre at Mount Allison University
44 Main Street, Sackville, N.B.
E4L 1A7
Phone : 506-364-2527 FAX : 506-364-2625

SUMMARY REPORT

On March 25, 1999 the First New Brunswick Summit on Learning Disabilities, sponsored by the T.R. Meighen Foundation, convened at Tweedie Hall on the campus of Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB. Forty-five people attended, representing Parents, Students, Secondary and Postsecondary Teachers, Corrections Canada Instructors, Adult Literacy Instructors, Medical Doctors, Nurses, Speech-Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Registered Psychologists, the Department of Education, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association, and the organizers, The Meighen Centre of Mount Allison and the Learning Disabilities Association of New Brunswick.

The overwhelming observation, voiced again and again throughout the day by professionals from the various different disciplines, was that the needs of people with Learning Disabilities (LD) are not being adequately met by the health and education systems in the Province of New Brunswick, and that in the interests of both those individuals and the province itself, substantial changes need to be made.

In the interests of identifying those necessary changes, the participants spent the day focused on Learning Disabilities issues: sharing their different professional perspectives in working sessions, identifying and speaking out about their gravest concerns, narrowing them down to the four most crucial issues, and finally suggesting ways to address those issues.

Many participants noted the need for early identification and assessment of LD; they commented that some children had no practical access to assessments while others

were assessed repeatedly, to no useful purpose. It was also observed that the delay between the assessment and identification of LD and that child receiving proper services was often much too long; the assessments were not being adequately followed up in too many cases. Concern was also expressed about the quality of the assessments, which was judged to be uneven; about the over-use of jargon in assessment reports which makes them difficult to understand, even for some professionals in other disciplines; and the lack of teamwork or even communication between the medical, social welfare and educational authorities and agencies, all of whom might be involved with a single individual.

Participants noted with concern the lack of broad awareness of LD in society as a whole, and even in the professions most likely to be directly involved with people with LD: teachers, doctors, school nurses, social workers, etc. Parents in particular reported frustration at having to explain even the very most basic facts all over again, every year. Physicians reported that although they were often the first professional consulted when parents felt there was a problem, they did not know what they needed to know about learning disabilities, and had no easy access to the Psychologists who might be able to provide necessary information. As to teachers, it was noted that the Education programme at UNB for instance, does not include a mandatory course in dealing with LD. "Labelling" in the schools is seen as a negative act, and yet without a label, the problem is too easily overlooked or ignored. The lack of information at the professional level is serious; it is equally disturbing that equivalent ignorance of learning disabilities is found in educational administration at the school and District levels, and in government where policies are established and funds are allocated. It was generally felt that LD was not treated seriously or given any high priority; one participant pointed out that a diagnosis of cerebral palsy or of leukemia gave access to almost unlimited funds to counteract the condition, whereas the diagnosis of a learning disability conferred no access to funds at all. The lack of awareness remains a problem throughout the LD individual's life; postsecondary educators, employment counsellors and employers all lack understanding of the strengths and needs of LD individuals.

Participants shared a perception that not everyone has equal access to the services that do exist. Recent media attention to particular problems and their subsequent resolution had heightened the participants' awareness of the "squeaky wheel" syndrome: those who are willing and able to complain loud, long, and to the right people, seem to get results, while those who may not be particularly articulate or well-

connected get no results at all. In addition, where you live in the Province, and even what school you attend in a District, whether you are anglophone or francophone or aboriginal can make a great deal of difference in your access to assessment and subsequent resources. Participants agreed that there is a lack of a single seamless, cohesive Province-wide approach to LD that would extend equal opportunity to all children born and educated in New Brunswick.

The issue of a smooth transition through the system from earliest infancy to adulthood was raised in several contexts. A gap was perceived between the early intervention services, which are considered to be quite good, and the elementary schools, where a child may or may not receive the services required. In this context, as in others, problems were observed with lines of communication between schools and outside agencies in regard to information and documentation about individuals; there appears to be a lack of communication between social, medical and educational professionals. Within the school system itself, it has been observed that information is not always transferred from one year's teacher to the next year's teacher, even at the same school. Neither is there always continuity in the services offered to the child. With that problem in mind, the question of the quality of the child's Cumulative file arose. It was felt that comments in the file are sometimes "sanitized" to the point that they do not reflect reality or convey useful information. The question was raised of whether there are legal impediments to frankness in teachers' comments in the file, and whether teachers are encouraged to look upon the file as a source of valuable information about the child. The issue of social promotion versus repeating a grade was raised, and parents commented that there is little benefit in repeating a grade unless the difficulty that caused the original failure to learn is understood and addressed. If the repeated year simply repeats the same ineffective strategies, the child is unlikely to make any progress. It was also noted that too many children with LD, even if they do make it to high school graduation, leave without the self-knowledge, ability to self-advocate, and overall action plan that they will need to succeed in the outside world. Once in the outside world, it is noted that fewer resources are available to them: postsecondary instructors are not necessarily trained teachers and may be quite unaware of LD, and workplace trainers and employers are even less aware.

Other concerns noted were the impacts, financial and emotional, of LD on the family as well as the LD person, the need for active partnership between students, parents, educators and health professionals, and the confidentiality of information relating to an individual. Although there are clearly some costs associated with remedying these

concerns, the overwhelming opinion of the group was that society has a choice between paying now, and enabling LD children to grow up to lead useful lives, or paying later, for the social costs of frustration, anger and untreated disability.

At the end of the day, the four concerns considered the most urgent were the issue of early identification and assessment of LD; the need for education to promote broad awareness of LD in society as a whole; the need for a seamless, cohesive Provincial approach to LD; and the need for a coordinated continuum of programs and services to facilitate the LD student's transition from pre-Kindergarten right through to the workplace.

On April 15 a second meeting was held in Fredericton to form the Action Group that will design and pursue the strategies necessary to achieve changes to the specified areas of concern identified by the Summit.

As its first step, the Action Group will be making a presentation to the New Brunswick Social Policy Review Committee on May 6th or 7th.