



Supporting Services Supporting Learning

A Submission to the Ministerial
Commission to Review
ISSP/Pathways by the
Newfoundland and Labrador
Teachers' Association

December 2006

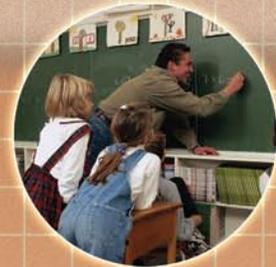


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Introduction

The Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association thanks the Minister of Education, the Honorable Joan Burke, for establishing the ISSP/Pathways Review Commission and we look forward with great anticipation to the recommendations of Commissioner Bernice Langdon and Vice-Commissioner Bill Somerton. The teachers of this province have, for almost a decade, been voicing their concerns about the delivery of special services to our students and the impact it is having on their work life. We welcome this opportunity to discuss these issues and hopefully have a positive impact on the ISSP/Pathways process. We hope Government's response to the Commission's findings will reflect a true commitment to resolving some of the issues surrounding the workload associated with ISSP/Pathways. Certainly Minister Burke's comments to Jonathan Crowe on CBC Television on October 11, 2006, when discussing the delivery of special services, indicated that the commitment does exist at the very top when she said:

But certainly by September when they go back to school, a lot of the questions that we're dealing with this year and dealt with in the past years shouldn't arise next year because we're hoping to have that process more fine tuned for everyone.

Appendix A provides a chronology of the NLTA's activity since April 1998 on this topic. The first major meeting of Department of Education officials and the NLTA representatives occurred on January 15, 1999, facilitated by William Shallow and Associates. At that time the NLTA brought forward issues in four key areas; namely:

- I. Policies and Procedures on meeting needs of students who require special education and remedial services;
- II. Teacher Leave for Professional Development;
- III. Outcomes, Assessment and Accountability; and
- IV. Curriculum Implementation must be accompanied by necessary supports and resources among the sub-issues.

Specific to special education and remedial services, the following four difficulties were identified in 1999:

- I. Implementation of Pathways with minimal inservicing for teachers at the classroom level.
- II. Documentation procedures which are time-consuming, place unmanageable burdens upon guidance personnel and are particularly difficult for teachers who do not have the expertise or training.
- III. Frequent denial of services to students who are identified, documented and assessed at the school and district level.
- IV. Major concern over students who require remedial help. There will be little available assistance from special education teachers and classroom teachers find it impossible to meet the needs of remedial students, given the wide range of other responsibilities and the lack of expertise among many regular teachers.

Appendix B gives more detail of the January 15, 1999 meeting. In this same time frame, the NLTA issued a document entitled *The Crisis in Student Support. Call for Action on Special Matters: A Report of the Review of Special Education* (see Appendix C). This response to the report by Dr. Patricia M. Canning entitled *Special Matters: A Report of the Review of Special Education* contained nine recommendations relating to the delivery of special services. The NLTA does not wish to reiterate all of the debate since 1998 but references the above to demonstrate the consistent and constant efforts of the NLTA to address those issues. Unfortunately, many of the issues have gone unresolved for years and now is the time to deal meaningfully with them.

In today's world, many employers are developing programs to promote employee "engagement". This is a belief that by increasing worker commitment you can get employees to go beyond the normal or acceptable level of work to something greater. It would be fair to say that in this province, teachers have transcended employee "engagement" and are at the level of employee "marriage". Teachers have gone beyond normal or acceptable levels of teaching. They have married themselves to providing services to the children they serve to such a level that they cannot sustain this performance level for a full career. Any belief that teacher criticism of Pathways/ISSPs was resistance to change or lack of commitment to a new model of special services delivery is simply not true.

Upon the announcement by Minister Burke that a Commission was appointed to review ISSP/Pathways, the NLTA established an Ad Hoc Committee of teachers to prepare a submission to the Commission. We conducted a questionnaire among the membership during October 2006 and this report represents the most current views of teachers. It is safe to say that many of the issues of 1999 remain today.

In any respectful workplace, the employer does not ignore the concerns of its workers; the employer does not expect more than an employee can reasonably produce in a normal workday. With the present level of demands on the teaching profession of this province and the lack of resources to meet those demands, many teachers feel disrespected and demoralized. Many are asking for transfers or are leaving the profession altogether.

At last teachers are being asked for input. Teachers accept this invitation and the following is intended as recommendations which could see a balance in teacher workload while continuing to provide a high level of delivery of educational services to the children of Newfoundland and Labrador.

We believe any review of this delivery of services must focus on matters related to inclusion, time/workload, program development and personnel supports.

Inclusion

As early as 1996, the Canning Report, *Special Matters: A Report of the Review of Special Education*, revealed a number of difficulties with the implementation of Department of Education policies in the area of Special Education. These difficulties stemmed largely from a lack of adequate support and translated into including in the regular classroom almost all the students who previously had received the services of special education teachers in separate settings. Although one cannot deny the desirability of inclusion, it is important that a variety of options be available to meet the diversity of student needs. As the Cascade of Services Model cited in the Canning Report suggests, “inclusion is but one of a number of avenues available to students’ needs and the regular classroom must be considered as but one of a number of placement options.”

The NLTA is always concerned about any practices that place undue stress at the classroom level and believes that necessary supports must be provided to ensure the best possible instruction to all students. While the Special Education Policy of the Department of Education identifies many desirable approaches to the delivery of Special Education Services, the NLTA has always had concerns regarding the translation of that policy into practice.

Philosophically, inclusion is desirable. The movement towards meeting a wider range of needs within the regular classroom is fundamentally sound. However, in surveys conducted over the years, including the most recent in October 2006, our members tell us that the supports for non-categorical students in an inclusive classroom are inadequate.

The NLTA supports the philosophy of inclusion whenever possible, provided it is resourced adequately and offers an environment that best suits the needs of the child. For some children, full inclusion is not the optimum setting. In providing the best programming for each child a range of placement possibilities should be considered. For these reasons the following is being recommended:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognizing that all children have the right to be educated in the most suitable setting, a wide variety of placement options are essential, ranging from inclusion to alternate placements, and adequate supports must be provided to achieve this goal.

Time/Workload

Pathway 2

It is a consistent theme among teachers that too much time and too many resources are consumed by the documentation process of the present delivery model of special services.

There is general agreement that Pathway 2 interventions are simply good teaching practice where teachers find some technique or strategy to address the learning needs of children in the regular class when difficulties arise. Unfortunately, the present model requires that a full ISSP be developed for each of these children and the necessary planning meetings and meetings with parents must occur. The NLTA feels that this practice should be changed.

The feedback from the majority of teachers revealed that in excess of 50% of all ISSP documentation is related to students on Pathway 2. Given the workload demands on non-categorical special education teachers and the strict criteria for the provision of intervention outlined in the cascade model of service, students who are on Pathway 2 rarely receive intervention outside the regular classroom setting. At best, non-categorical special education teachers are able to provide a very limited consultative service to their classroom colleagues. In essence, students who are on Pathway 2 are primarily the responsibility of the classroom teacher. In many cases, the accommodations and adaptations provided by the classroom teacher to Pathway 2 students are simply being termed “good teaching”. The Pathway 2 accommodations and adaptations can be adequately communicated to parents/guardians and the students’ subsequent teachers via report cards and the cumulative record. Furthermore, the results of the Criterion Referenced Tests (CRTs) that are written at the key stage levels (i.e., grades 3, 6, 9 and 12) can serve as a check and balance for parents and the education system as a whole.

Pathway 2 documentation is overwhelmingly time-consuming and serves little purpose. The following recommendation is being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 2

Eliminate the need for ISSP documentation for Pathway 2 students whose required accommodations and adaptations are met by the regular classroom teacher.

Remedial Supports

One of the major issues identified by members of the NLTA in a recent survey was the need to have remedial supports available to students who require short-term interventions to attain some concept or skill with which they are struggling. These are typically Pathway 1 students who, for some reason, encounter stumbling blocks that can be removed with the focused attention of remedial help, thus enabling them to carry on with a regular, unmodified program. Over the years the NLTA has constantly heard of these students who are “falling through the cracks”, who do not require the longer-term supports of Pathway 2, who are not non-categorical special needs students, but who need some measure of specialized support for a brief period.

Some estimates indicate that the learning of between 18 and 20 percent of students can be enhanced through extra, short-term supports. In a class of 25, for example, it would not be uncommon to find five or six students who are having some difficulty with reading or with certain concepts in Mathematics, or in attaining the study skills necessary to work independently. The provision of such specialized, individualized support is often very difficult for the regular classroom teacher, who would have a variety of needs in a class of 25 or more students. With specialized assistance and early intervention from a trained remedial teacher, many struggling students can overcome specific difficulties and subsequently experience success. An excellent example of how a remedial program has yielded positive results can be found in the marked improvement in performance of students who experienced the Early Success program.

The NLTA believes that the deployment of remedial teachers and resources is an excellent example of early intervention, which will reduce the number of problems that materialize and escalate throughout schooling.

The following recommendation is being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 3

That a new allocation of remedial teachers be introduced, above and beyond the current allocation, to provide specialized intervention to the many students who require additional supports beyond those which can be provided by the classroom teacher.

Documentation

The accessing of the student supports which are allocated from the Department of Education is seen to be problematic. It is a general feeling among teachers that there is a critical under-funding of such resources. As a result of this, the process of documenting and re-documenting of student needs has become adversarial and flawed by mistrust.

Teachers frequently spend much time assessing, documenting student needs and modifying existing curricula to develop alternate programs at all levels of schooling from primary through high school, only to have an application for resources denied by Department of Education personnel. Teachers feel their professional judgement is constantly being questioned by people who know nothing about individual children in their classes. Then when a resource is obtained, teachers dread the re-documentation process and the reams of paperwork required as early as the next school year to retain those supports.

The application process needs to be simplified so that the present experience of spending vast amounts of time applying for resources is not met with a rejection by the Department of Education and there must be enough resources provided to meet the identified needs of children.

Teachers believe the administrative functions of the delivery of special services consume a significant portion of teachers' and schools' resources and should be re-examined to allow the valuable resource of a teacher's time to be directed as much as possible to the delivery of services to children with needs.

While documentation for Criteria C very clearly defines our moderately cognitively delayed group of students, there is a very specific high needs group of mildly cognitively delayed students, that under the present system cannot receive the highly specialized supports and interventions needed to meet their severe and diverse needs. These students, with IQ levels below 70 and severe impairment in only two areas of adaptive behavior functioning, do not fit the present Criteria C designation and rely primarily on the services of the non-categorical teacher to target the requisite intensive alternate programming.

The following recommendations are being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 4

Revise the ISSP forms to reduce the volume of paper work, to eliminate repetition and to reduce the number of signatures required.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Require re-documentation for students with a Criteria D, E, F and G exceptionality/designation only at the end of the key stage levels (i.e., grades 3, 6 and 9). Re-documentation should address only programs and outcomes identified in the ISSP.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That more intensive supports and direct interventions be provided for our mildly cognitively delayed group of students. This could come in the form of a new criteria classification with requisite supports or added non-categorical support based on the needs of individual schools.

ISSP Meetings

We believe there must be adequate release time from teaching to plan and conduct the meetings related to ISSP documentation. Teachers question the need of having all teachers who are involved in a child's educational plan attend all meetings. This is seen as unnecessary and, on occasion, intimidating to parents who face a large panel of professionals at an ISSP meeting related to their child. It is felt that the number of meetings might be reduced if they could be incorporated into regular parent-teacher visitations or other interactions between the home and school. Moreover, other forms of communication such as teleconferencing or emailing might be an alternative method of sharing information between the home and school.

The following recommendations are made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 7

Reduce the meetings associated with ISSPs to one per year unless extenuating circumstances warrant more.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Provide release time for teachers to plan and attend ISSP meetings.

Course Modification and Program Development

In implementing Pathway 3, modification of a course or program requires more than the mere deletion or simplification of existing outcomes. It has implications for developing individualized activities and identifying different resources and materials for students to use. It is a difficult task to delete outcomes on a consistent basis and maintain the integrity of the course and its strands. Availability of sample modified courses and access to a searchable database of outcomes would be invaluable resources.

For Pathway 4 programs, alternate curriculum must be developed. Notwithstanding the need for individualization, this programming is often applicable to many students who share similar needs. Availability of a database of Pathway 4 courses would assist teachers in the development of individual alternate courses, reduce workload, achieve more consistency, higher quality of programming and greater efficiency.

There are programming needs that apply to a range of students from Pathways 2 through 4. The Canning Report (1996), *Special Matters: A Report of the Review of Special Education*, stressed the importance of the Division of Program Development providing more basic and alternate courses for use in school, particularly at the high school level. In addition, Canning stated:

Many students require vocational training, a continued focus on literacy skills, and a lower priority given to academic content.

The following recommendations are being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 9

To assist with the curriculum modification process, a software package such as the Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner (OCUP) must be provided to all teachers (in the official language of their choice) to allow them to search, match and modify outcomes and curricula as required for individual as well as group instruction. (To review the OCUP, visit www.ocup.org or reference Appendix D.)

RECOMMENDATION 10

That sample modified Pathway 3 courses and specific Pathway 4 curricula (alternate courses) must be developed and/or collated by the Division of Program Development in conjunction with the Division of Student Support Services and the Division of Evaluation and Research for students with special needs.

RECOMMENDATION 11

It is incumbent on the Department of Education to provide a greater number of programming options for students with special needs that will more effectively equip them with the requisite employability skills which will help to prepare them to be productive, contributing members of society.

Early Interventions

Early childhood literature is very clear that many critical phases in child development occur in children from birth to age eight. Thus, early intervention is essential to ensuring that children are able to reach their full potential in their most-enhancing environment. While the Department's current model allows for early intervention from birth to age 8, a shortage of personnel prevents this service from being provided.

Another major difficulty in providing early intervention is a result of the current application of the learning disability definition that requires a child to be three years behind before s/he is identified. For very young children, it would

take a considerable amount of time to identify a three year lag and there is a great risk that by the time they qualify for learning disability assistance they have not received the attention they require in the regular classroom, and have therefore missed the meaningful immediate help that could have been so valuable to them earlier.

In relation to early intervention, the old adage that “a stitch in time saves nine” is noteworthy. During a CBC Radio Noon program hosted by Ann Budgett on October 30, 2006, Dr. David Philpott of Memorial University stated that the lack of early screening and intervention is the greatest irritant and source of concern that he has with the current Pathways to Graduation Model. Delayed intervention can never have the same positive impact as early intervention during a child’s critical phases of development.

Intensive early intervention is very effective in maximizing student learning.

The following recommendation is made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 12

Systematic pre-school screening and intensive intervention programs should be implemented provincially by the Department of Health in consultation with officials from the Division of Early Childhood and Division of Student Support Services at the Department of Education. Student intervention services should continue on a documented needs basis throughout the students’ school experience in their most enhancing environment.

Needs-Based Allocation Formula

For some time the NLTA has suggested that the unique nature of our school system requires a teacher allocation formula based on need rather than student population. For example, the ability to deliver programs in a small, rural school requires a different approach to staffing if all needs are to be met adequately and the full range of programming is to be made available to all students. The NLTA is encouraged to learn the Department of Education has established a Commission to review the current teacher allocation formula. In order to ensure that all students in this province, regardless of the size of their communities or schools, have equitable access to quality resources and programs, the following recommendation is made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 13

The allocation of teaching units should consider the unique circumstances of each school and should be based upon the following class size limitations, recognizing the significance of class composition. To determine maximum class size, students deemed Pathway 2 would count as 2 students, Pathway 3 would count as 3 students, and Pathway 4 would count as 4 students:

- A. Kindergarten classes – maximum 12 students
- B. Primary classes – maximum 20 students
- C. Elementary/Intermediate and High School classes – maximum 20 students
- D. Separate Special Education classes – maximum 6 students.
- E. Groups of students designated as either Criteria D, E, F or G – maximum 4 students.
- F. The number of students in laboratory, workshop and computer classes should not exceed the number of fully equipped student stations provided, or the number of students recommended by the Department of Education, whichever is less.
- G. i) Multi-grade and multi-course classes (K-3) – a maximum of 12 students.
ii) Multi-grade or multi-course classes (4-12) – maximum of 15 students.
- H. In situations where the integration of Special Needs Students occurs in regular classrooms – a maximum of 15 students.

Personnel Supports

Meeting the diverse needs in a school has become extremely challenging and must be a primary concern. On a day-to-day basis, teachers attempt to meet the needs of students who:

- have behavioral difficulties;
- require supports and/or modifications to their programs;
- receive categorical and non-categorical support;
- have medical issues;
- require enrichment; and
- experience social and emotional problems.

For all these students, needs must be assessed, programs must be developed and, in many cases, specialized support must be provided. For example, more recent practices in such areas as Transition and Behavioral Management Planning have personnel implications.

Clearly, the range of personnel required to meet such needs is great. An effective team is necessary to ensure that no child is denied service. The NLTA has heard consistently that, in addition to classroom teachers, we must have essential supports from guidance counselors, educational psychologists, itinerant teachers, special education teachers, and student assistants. From surveys conducted from 1999 until 2006 there has been a consistent message that there are inadequate numbers of support personnel in the system. To be more specific, a number of deficiencies have been identified time and time again.

Special Education Allocations

With Pathways being a proprietary model, the services of special education teachers rarely extend to Pathway 1, 2, and 3, seldom reaching the regular classroom. Yet, such specialized service is desperately needed in the classroom.

The following recommendations are being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 14

That the allocation of special education teachers be increased to ensure that services are available to all students including those requiring Pathway 2 and Enrichment supports.

RECOMMENDATION 15

That the support of special education teachers for Pathway 3 students be mandated rather than made available only if more severe needs are met first.

Guidance Services

Guidance counselors have unmanageable workloads. Besides their counseling duties, they are involved extensively in assessment and testing of students, serve on most ISSP teams in a school, and have major responsibility for students with diagnosed behavior disorders. It has reached the point where they can no longer offer proactive programs such as career planning and mentoring, or help with homework and study skills.

The following recommendation is being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 16

That the allocation of guidance counselors be increased to a ratio of 1 per 250 students.

Student Assistants

Student Assistants are valued resources who provide essential services for students. Deficiencies in the allocation of student assistants have been identified frequently. There are many reports of allocations not being determined until well into the school year. There are numerous incidents of only part-time support being approved for categorical students who are in school for the entire day.

The following recommendations are being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 17

That the hours designated for student assistants be increased to ensure the legitimate needs of all students are met on a full-time basis.

RECOMMENDATION 18

That the procedures for allocating student assistants be reviewed and revised to ensure timely and sufficient provision of personnel prior to the start of the school year.

Criteria C Allocations

There are incidents where Criteria C students are provided with the services of categorical teachers for only part of the day, sometimes resulting in negative classroom experiences in an inclusionary setting or the usage of a disproportionate amount of non-categorical time.

The following recommendation is being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 19

That all Criteria C teachers be assigned on a full-time basis.

Coordination of School-Based Services

As we strive to meet the needs of students on various Pathways, the ISSP process has truly become a major school-wide initiative impacting on every teacher in the school. Such a focus warrants the introduction of a position within each school whereby an individual is available to coordinate the implementation of Pathways, provide specialized expertise to colleagues, and advice on matters concerning programming, assessment and documentation.

The following recommendations are being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 20

That, through a new allocation, a position of Special Services Department Head be introduced for intermediate and senior high schools.

RECOMMENDATION 21

That for primary and elementary schools additional allocations be introduced for a Coordinator of Special Services position. This individual would provide professional development to colleagues and share expertise on matters concerning programming, assessment and documentation.

Learning Resources

Key resources in any school are the services provided by the learning resource teacher or teacher-librarian. Given the nature of an outcomes-driven curriculum and the emphasis on life-long learning and resource-based learning, it is critical that school librarians be available to work with teachers in helping all students become independent learners to the best of their ability. In recent years the number of school librarians has been cut dramatically and the rich programs offered through the school resource centre have been seriously compromised.

The following recommendation is being made by the NLTA:

RECOMMENDATION 22

That an allocation for learning resource teachers (school teacher-librarians) be reinstated with a ratio of 1 per 500.

Conclusion

The teachers of this province have chosen this profession because of their commitment to the children placed in their care. They are committed to providing quality learning environments and experiences to children of varying abilities. However, to achieve this, there must be a recognition of the significant resources needed to provide this level of service. There must be a recognition that teachers have been trying for a decade to implement a delivery model that is under-resourced and overtaxed. From a professional perspective, teachers cannot continue to implement this model without major changes. It is the hope of the NLTA that the recommendations contained in this submission will be implemented for the 2007-08 school year.

Summary of Recommendations

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