Brief on Systemic Barriers to Implementing Inclusive Education in New Brunswick

New Brunswick Association for Community Living/Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intégration communautaire

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Introduction

As the government of New Brunswick moves to improve and strengthen inclusive education, identifying and addressing the systemic barriers to implementing the inclusive education model will be necessary. This brief will attempt to offer the insight of the New Brunswick Association for Community Living/Association du Nouveau-Brunswick pour l'intrégration communautaire on the issue of current systemic barriers. This brief has been produced in collaboration with NBACL's/ANBIC's Inclusive Education Committee. This committee is made up of retired educators and education administrators, parents of persons with an intellectual disability, a representative from a university education faculty, and others who have an interest in promoting successful inclusive education for all students.

New Brunswick has over 20 years of experience in implementing a province wide inclusive education system. Since the mid-1980s, great progress has been made at many levels toward ensuring that New Brunswick's schools are inclusive places of learning for all students. However, there has been inconsistency in the implementation of the inclusive education model since it became provincial law and policy in 1986. Experience from many places in New Brunswick indicates that good inclusive education can be successfully implemented. It is also clear, however, that some schools and school districts are not implementing inclusive education to a degree that is satisfactory. In some areas, significant segregation is occurring, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Some schools and districts have demonstrated a lack of willingness and confidence in their ability to implement known best practices for inclusive education.

The need for consistent province wide implementation of the inclusive education model is even greater today than 20 years ago. There is a greater range of diversity now represented in our student population. It is clear that schools and classrooms in New Brunswick are different from what they were even two decades ago. Increasingly, educators and education administrators are recognizing that each classroom presents a diverse variety of learners. Students with disabilities are one aspect of this diversity. Additionally, the students who were served under the *Auxiliary Classes Act* prior to 1986 represent only a small portion of students now served by the supports put in place for inclusive education.

This brief suggests answers to the questions:

- Why, in 2007, are some schools and districts in New Brunswick more inclusive than other similarly situated schools and districts?
- As inclusive education has been shown to benefit all students and the total school environment, why have best practices still not been generalized across New Brunswick school districts and systems?

The inconsistency in the implementation of inclusive education points clearly to the need to identify and address issues at a systems level. By adopting a systemic approach, identification of specific barriers and strategies to reduce and eliminate these barriers can be undertaken. Systems change on a province wide level will take time, commitment and the strategic investment of resources.

In identifying these systemic barriers, NBACL/ANBIC is aware that the Department of Education is currently taking measures to address many of these issues through the implementation of the McKay Report recommendations and through the recently released provincial Education Plan, **_When Kids Come First_**. We commend the government for its attention and action on these issues and we look forward to offering our ideas for improving our public education system for all children.

Identification of Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers to the implementation of inclusive education have been identified through other reviews and documents. The MacKay review and report touched on many of the barriers that will be identified in this brief. In addition, recent reviews of student services conducted in School districts 6, 8 and 10 have also highlighted a number of systemic barriers.

While this brief identifies a number of systemic barriers, it needs to be acknowledged that there is a high level of interconnectedness between some or all of these barriers. For example, barriers related to the lack of acceptance of the inclusive education model are arguably tied to the lack of adequate accountability. Similarly, the lack of knowledge and skills to effectively implement inclusive educations may also be linked to attitudes about inclusive education, and so on.

In public discussions on inclusive education, the one issue that receives the most attention is the lack of resources. While we do not deny that resource and support issues are important, it is evident that some school districts do a much better job of implementing the inclusive education model while receiving the same funding level as other districts. There may be some socio-economic and demographic issues that may present challenges to certain districts that do not exist to the same degree in other parts of the province.

Systemic barriers that stem from a lack of resources and support may well relate to the need for additional funding for the education system. It is our belief, however, that the barriers also involve other, more "systemic" issues.

Below is a review of systemic barriers to implementing successful inclusive education as identified by NBACL's/ANBIC's Inclusive Education Committee.

Barrier # 1 - Difficulties with embracing diversity and the inclusive education philosophy/model

This barrier may be one of the most difficult to measure but also one of the critical reasons for the lack of full implementation of the inclusive education model. As we indicated in our submission to the MacKay review, successful inclusive schools are typically schools that intentionally attempt to create a culture of hospitality, willingness and creativity. Parents have told us that they know fairly quickly whether they (or their child) are welcomed without question.

Experience has shown that one of the most important aspects of inclusive education throughout the school system is the creation of positive and inclusive school cultures. An inclusive school culture will have many elements and is usually defined by a clear sense of hospitality, willingness and creativity that exists within the school. One recent study of inclusive education at the secondary school level concluded:

> Schools with a strong positive ethos in favor of diversity and helping others seem to be more successful… These were schools that seem to be taking steps toward restructuring the way in which they work so that all students are able to participate. This positive ethos is reflected in staff attitudes towards teaching students with disabilities. Where positive attitudes existed in school staff, a more inclusive environment seems to result (Loreman, 2003).

Schools with an inclusive school culture that value diversity appear on many levels to understand the difference between the concept of "integration" and "inclusion". With integration, onus is placed on students to adapt to the school environment and the needs of the school. Inclusive education, however, is fundamentally about how we create environments where all students can be successful regardless of ability. With inclusive education, there is a strong need to structure the environment within the school to foster a sense of belonging and hospitality. This often requires a shift in attitudes on the part of school administrators, educators, other school staff, and students.

At the international level the value of inclusion as a foundation for a quality education system has also been recognized. A 2003 UNESCO report has concluded that:

Inclusive education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings. Rather than being a marginal theme on how some learners can be integrated in the mainstream education, inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems in order to respond to the diversity of learners. It aims to enable both teachers and learners to feel comfortable with diversity and to see it as a challenge and enrichment in the learning environment, rather than a problem. (From: *Overcoming Exclusion through Inclusive Approaches in Education: A Challenge and a Vision*; UNESCO, 2003)

Unfortunately, the inclusion "philosophy" and model has not been embraced throughout the province to the extent necessary for full implementation. For example, the 2003 study on student services conducted by the Department of Education indicated the following in reference to school District 8:

However, the results of this study are concerning in that it is clear that the district has progressed little toward inclusionary philosophy and practice. The school district should consider making this a priority in the next five to ten years, and collaborate with local community members to address issues of concern.

We are not intending to single out school District 8 in this brief. It is arguable that similar conclusions could be drawn for other provincial school districts. In addition, differences in the extent to which diversity and inclusion are embraced exist at different grade levels (for example, diversity and inclusion are generally much better embraced at the elementary school level as opposed to the high school level), as well as from one school to another.

Addressing this barrier will take time and effort at many levels. Some educators or administrators have a lack of understanding of what inclusive education concepts imply. For example, some believe that inclusive education means that all students must be in the classroom all of the time. Others believe that the responsibility for teaching certain children lies with paraprofessionals or resource teachers. It is crucial that educators and administrators be given adequate opportunities to learn about and fully understand the fundamental sociological and pedagogical concepts underlying inclusive education.

Experience has also shown that embracing diversity and the inclusive education philosophy requires strong and effective leadership at the provincial, school district, and school level. In inclusive school districts, superintendents, directors of education and other administrators take seriously the responsibility for making all schools in the district welcoming and inclusive places of learning. In inclusive schools, principals are the educational leaders who demonstrate by example what inclusion is, and to also assist teachers through observation and follow-up

consultation. Leadership requires knowledge and a clear understanding of how inclusive education is effectively implemented.

Barrier # 2: The lack of knowledge and skills to effectively implement inclusive education

This issue received considerable attention in the MacKay report. From a systems perspective, having educators who do not feel they have the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach diverse learners in inclusive classrooms creates an inevitable barrier to the implementation of inclusive education practices. Without the necessary skills and knowledge, educators will feel less confident about their ability to effectively teach and include students with varying abilities. In turn, this will create pressure to look for alternatives outside the regular classroom for certain students (for example, separate classrooms or resource rooms). It will also create pressure to pass off the responsibility for certain students to others, most notably to paraprofessionals who are asked to support students throughout the school day often outside of the regular learning environment or within the classroom but separated from other students.

There are a variety of reasons that the lack of knowledge and skills has become a systemic barrier to implementing inclusive education. One is the lack of adequate pre-service training (particularly for Anglophone teachers). This issue has been known for some time; correcting it will require determined and focused by the Department of Education to overcome what can be considered the recalcitrance of some Faculties of Education.

A second reason has been the lack of attention paid to in-service training over the years. Following the introduction of Bill 85 considerable efforts at in-service training were made in the years following. However, while some school districts continued to make training on inclusive education a priority, others did not. In those districts that did not provide for adequate in-service training a *knowledge and skills deficit* began to grow, being compounded by the arrival of new teachers who were not adequately prepared for the realities of diverse classrooms. The lack of accountability at the school and district levels has allowed this knowledge and skills deficit to grow and persist to the point where it has too often been considered an immutable given.

This knowledge and skills deficit has been acknowledged through the MacKay review and in other ways. It is currently being addressed by recent efforts to focus some professional development efforts in the area of inclusive education. It is imperative that leaders from both school districts and schools receive training that will allow them to train others and share knowledge about inclusive education concepts and strategies. A great deal more work is required to address this significant systemic barrier.

Barrier # 3: The lack of adequate and appropriate accountability mechanisms

The need for accountability relating to the implementation of inclusive education is crucial. Systemically, the lack of accountability over the years has contributed to an education system that has had inconsistent implementation of provincial policy and of the inclusive education model. Issues of accountability and the implementation of provincial policy also appear at times to conflict with local district autonomy. Is there indeed a systemic barrier caused by the lack of ability to impose an accountability framework that would apply across the province?

An accountability strategy to determine the inclusiveness of public schools must have clear goals. NBACL/ANBIC believes that the overall goal of such a strategy is to ensure to the fullest extent possible that all children in New Brunswick public school receive a quality education that challenges them, that instils in them a level of learning that continues through their adult life, and that prepares them for the future. This is most likely to happen in schools that soundly demonstrate the key elements of inclusive schooling. In these schools, all students are respected, welcomed, learn to cooperate, feel that they belong and are motivated to learn. In these schools, diversity and individuality are celebrated and educators have the knowledge and skills to effectively teach all children and to work in close cooperation with each other and with families.

An accountability framework to determine the inclusiveness of public schools must identify the factors which are common to inclusive schools and find ways to show whether or not these factors are present in a particular school. These factors or indicators must also serve as a guide to how well students are being encouraged to learn, especially (but not only) students whose learning cannot be assessed by methods such as standardized testing. Fortunately, much thought has already been given to the indicators of successful and inclusive schools.

Barrier # 4: The serious inadequacies of the current system of providing professional supports within the education system.

In our view, the current Support Services to Education Agreement no longer serves the education system adequately. Currently, professional support services are spread out under the Departments of Health, Justice, and Family and Community Services. Steps have been taken to undertake a high-level review of these services and how best to provide them. From a systems perspective, the housing of these professional supports outside of the education system has led to a number of barriers, including:

- The lack of ability of the education system to put professional services in place when and where they are needed;
- The diversion of professional services to meet other needs that fall outside of the education system.

- Long waiting times to access needed services and supports.

One important matter of principle that needs to be decided (because much else depends on it) is whether the professionals providing services within the education system are employed by another system or by another government department. We believe that the policy of having these professionals employed by another government department is flawed. In this regard, employees are responsible to their direct employer first, and to other service providers second. In our view, professionals such as speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, social workers, school psychologists, and educational consultants need to be working in the education system and given the mandate to support all students in the public education system.

Other systemic barriers stem from the need for qualified French language professional support in certain areas (such as Saint John, Fredericton and the Acadian Peninsula).

Barrier # 5: The lack of adequate opportunity and time for good collaboration, planning and preparation.

Collaboration and the use of collaborative teams are important best practices for inclusive education. This requires both the time and opportunity to bring people together to discuss issues relevant to inclusive education practices, either school wide issues or those that relate to be successful education of particular students. Collaboration provides for opportunities for brainstorming ideas and solutions. It also allows teachers and others to feel supported as they work through the sometimes difficult challenges that stem from the need and desire to implement effective inclusive practices.

Inclusive education also requires opportunity and time for educators to prepare lesson plans and strategies (including time for modifying or adapting curriculum) that may necessary to address a wide range of diverse strengths and needs within a particular classroom. Educators often identify the lack of adequate preparation time as a source of frustration when trying to respond to individual student needs and circumstances.

School administrators need to effectively recognize the work that is involved in implementing inclusive education practices by allowing educators adequate time to plan and collaborate with one another and with paraprofessionals. For example, specific segments of extra time to plan and collaborate may mean that some educators will have fewer hours of instruction time or fewer responsibilities for outside duty, etc.

From a systems perspective, the education system will need to identify how reasonable opportunities for collaboration and preparation can be provided within each school. It will also require that some specific attention be given to *training*

educators about what collaboration means and how it can be effectively practiced at the school and district level. Addressing this barrier may require adding resources to ensure that these key elements of the inclusive education model are built into the education system in a manner which is flexible, appropriate and accountable.

Barrier # 6: Ensuring that classrooms are an appropriate size and are heterogeneous (i.e., they reflect the broad range of diversity that exists within the student population).

An important foundation of inclusive education is the creation of heterogeneous classrooms where students of varying abilities learn together and from one another. However, the establishment of heterogeneous classrooms has been hampered to varying degrees in the Anglophone system as a result of French Immersion programs. It is well-known that in some schools the French Immersion option has created an imbalance in the core English classes as many of the "high achieving" students participate in French Immersion. In some cases, English classrooms have a high proportion of students who have special education plans. From a systemic viewpoint, it is very difficult to create inclusive classrooms when the student population has become more homogeneous by default.

It is arguable that the presence of French Immersion itself is not solely responsible for this imbalance in the classroom. There are also systemic barriers that stem from the lack of support for all students to participate in French Immersion programs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that support from resource teachers and paraprofessionals in French Immersion programs is lacking. Without adequate support, students who may encounter difficulties with learning will automatically be shut out of French Immersion programs.

The failure to achieve heterogeneous classrooms may also relate to other streaming practices. In these circumstances, there is a conscious effort on the part of school administrators to divide students on the basis of perceived ability. This practice becomes more prevalent at the high school level, but also happens at the middle and elementary levels. To its extreme, streaming practices can lead to the creation of separate learning environments for students identified as having similar characteristics (for example, students with intellectual or other developmental disabilities). These segregating practices continue to exist in many locations. In some districts, there has been a conscious effort to create alternative education sites or programs for specific groups of students. This includes programs (such as the International Baccalaureate program) for gifted students that promote the self view on the part of certain students that they are part of an elite.

Addressing these kinds of systemic barriers may not be easy and will likely time. Priority must be given to ensuring that educators and school administrators have

a firm understanding of inclusive education practices, including the significance of diverse and heterogeneous classrooms (and how to teach effectively in such classrooms). In addition, rethinking the way in which second language education is provided (and how all students may be supported to learn a second language) should be a province wide priority.

Lastly, systemic barriers may be created (even in heterogeneous classrooms) if the there is a lack of teaching resources. A good case can be made for increasing the number of teachers in schools. Increasing the teaching capacity in schools and classrooms and using such strategies as co-teaching, mentoring, in-service training, collaborative planning, meeting with parents, and modifying or adapting curriculum will be beneficial for all students, and particularly for those who have their own education plan.

Barrier # 7: The lack of a relevant curriculum based on the principles of universal design

Educators, particularly at the high school level, feel obliged to deliver a standard curriculum in a given grade or subject. The focus on curriculum area content sometimes leaves certain students (including those with exceptionalities) "without a meaningful link to the curriculum". To some degree, educators feel that since certain students do not follow the regular standard curriculum, these students should be outside of the regular class environment.

Effective inclusive education practices include the use of differentiated/multilevel instruction to tailor the curriculum as well as teaching strategies to ensure that students can learn to their own potential and level of understanding.

Over the past few years, however, increasing attention has been given to the concept of universal design in the context of education, including curriculum design. At the systems level, inclusive education would be greatly facilitated if schools used a curriculum based on the principles of universal design. Such a curriculum would enable all students to learn academically useful content that is of interest to them and to their personal capacity. It is not yet clear how universal design principles would be worked out in the current K to 12 curriculum package. Nevertheless, the principles of universal design should provide the conceptual framework for all future curriculum changes in New Brunswick. Within this framework, it will be important to recognize that some students will require specific supports to achieve success with an individualized education plan and program.

Barrier # 8: The appropriate use of paraprofessional supports within the education system.

Paraprofessionals have assumed some important roles in New Brunswick's education system. While the value of paraprofessionals is not in dispute,

NBACL/ANBIC has some serious concerns about the use of paraprofessionals in current school practice. These concerns were identified in an NBACL/ANBIC document entitled *Position Paper on the Roles and Responsibilities of Teacher Assistants within an Inclusive Education System* (July 2004). The concerns outlined by NBACL/ANBIC have been identified in formal research studies conducted elsewhere. In brief form, they are as follows:

- Some students receive most of their planning and instruction from the teacher assistant that allows teachers to become "disengaged" from the education process for these students, and to forfeit their responsibility.

- Some parents and educators equate inclusion with teacher assistant support, leading to increased demand for teacher assistants to support the inclusion of students with disabilities. The idea that inclusion and the use of paraprofessionals are synonymous has also been promoted by the education system, including the Department of Education and local school districts.

- There is often unnecessary and excessive proximity between students and teacher assistants, leading to isolation from other students and over-dependence on the teacher assistant.

- Teacher assistants receive little or no training on their roles in an inclusive education system and teachers have not received training on how to supervise the work of paraprofessionals.

The NBACL/ANBIC position paper outlines a number of recommendations to deal with these issues on a systemic level. The details of these recommendations are contained in the position paper and will not be repeated here. They are summarized as follows:

- Provide for consistent implementation of inclusive school practices (that incorporates effective roles for paraprofessionals).

- Provide clarification of the important roles of classroom and subject teachers, resource teachers and teacher assistants.

- Provide education and training for educators to build capacity in dealing with the diversity of student ability and learning styles.

- Provide direct education and training for teacher assistants.

- Provide education and awareness for parents so that they may be able to better understand the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals.

- Promote and implement peer support strategies.

- Develop greater flexibility in assignment of teacher assistant (paraprofessional) support.

Developing the knowledge and competencies of paraprofessional is an area that has been lacking, given the variety of roles and responsibilities that are placed on paraprofessionals within our system. It must be clear that we do not expect paraprofessionals to take on the roles of trained professional educators. At the same time, however, it is clear that the use of paraprofessionals in public schools has often "outpaced conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities, as well as [their] training and supervision needs" (Giangreco et. al., 1997).

Enhancing the knowledge and competencies of paraprofessionals must be based on the roles that these employees are expected to play within an inclusive school system. In this sense, paraprofessionals must effectively work to support teachers in classrooms, and not simply specific students with disabilities. This does not mean that paraprofessionals should not provide direct support roles to students, but this must be done in the context of promoting true inclusion and participation in academic learning and in non-academic activities. In this regard, paraprofessionals (like educators) must see themselves as *facilitators of inclusion*. This will require particular knowledge and skills in areas such as promoting student independence and interdependence and supporting students seen to have challenging behaviours in positive and inclusive ways.

Additionally, the appropriate assignment of paraprofessionals is sometimes hampered because of seniority considerations. This means that a school district or school may be prevented from making the best use of paraprofessionals based on particular classroom or student need. Greater flexibility in the assignment of paraprofessionals would alleviate some of these systemic issues.

Barrier # 9: The discriminatory effects of paraprofessional and transportation scheduling

Some districts and schools arguably discriminate against certain students with disabilities in two ways.

First, in some school districts, paraprofessionals are hired to work a five hour work day while students attend school for a longer period. In some circumstances, this arrangement creates difficulties for teachers and students who may need paraprofessional support for the full school day. One negative consequence of this practice has been the requirement for particular students with disabilities to leave school early because the support is no longer available.

Second, some students with disabilities have their school day shortened by having their school bus either arrive after school has started or leave before the

school day has ended. They are, therefore, deprived of the right to a full school day on an equal footing as students who do not have disabilities.

NBACL/ANBIC is not aware of any instances where students without disabilities are forced to accept a shortened school day for either of these two reasons.

Barrier # 10: The lack of adequate transitions for students entering a new school or moving from one grade level to another.

Schools and school teams require information about some students before they enter school or a new school. An appropriate transition process for students entering a new school would involve adequate time and opportunity for meeting with the student and his or her family, a review of the student's circumstances and prior educations plans (if any), planning for any accommodation or support requirements (including the modification of curriculum and teaching strategies), and other issues that may be relevant. Ideally, this transition process would occur in the late spring of the year and continue into the following school year. As with the collaboration issue noted above, the system needs to provide for adequate opportunity and time for this transition process to occur. Some areas (for example, District 1) have already adopted good transition practices that could be shared provincially.

Barrier # 11: The lack of adequate support parents/families to be true partners in inclusive education.

Parents and families are important partners in the education system. The need for a true partnership with families is even more so when students face academic and other challenges. Inclusive education requires the active involvement of parents and families in education planning and the implementation of education objectives. Too often, however, families may feel that they are not equal partners in this process. They also may feel ill-equipped to participate in education planning activities.

The lack of family involvement can be a significant systemic barrier to inclusive education. Concrete ways of supporting family involvement will need to be discussed and determined in order to keep the parent/school partnership strong.

Conclusion

This brief has identified a number of important systemic barriers to implementing good inclusive education throughout New Brunswick. It is not our usual preference to focus attention on barriers. We would rather focus on the many good examples of inclusive education in this province and ways to improve our education system for all children. It is clear, however, that the issues effecting progress with inclusive education are often systemic in nature. Once there is a

clear understanding of these systems issues, then concrete strategies can be formulated and implemented to effect real and lasting change.

There are many possible ways to address these systemic barriers. Some directions for facilitating systems level change have already been identified through the new Education Plan, *When Kids Come First*, as well as the McKay Report. Sustained attention and action that is strategically focused to support change is required. Continuous attention must also be paid to measuring success that is tied to identified indicators and outcomes. Being clear about where we want to be with inclusive education in New Brunswick over the next few years will help us understand when real progress has been made and what remains to be accomplished.