

# LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO

## Response to the 2008 Annual Report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario

### Sections 3.02, 3.04, 3.06 and 3.08

#### (Comments on 3.14 provided separately)

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) and its 20 community based chapters represent the interests of persons with learning disabilities (LDs) throughout Ontario. In the more than forty years since its formation, LDAO has expanded its activities and services to include youth and adults who have learning disabilities, in postsecondary and employment sectors, in addition to serving parents of children in elementary and secondary schools. LDAO has regularly provided consultation and constructive recommendations on all government initiatives that affect persons with learning disabilities in Ontario, including a written response to the 2001 Provincial Auditor's Report. We welcome the opportunity to provide our comments on the 2008 Provincial Auditor's Report.

People with LDs, of all ages, represent the largest disability group in Ontario. Learning disabilities influence all areas of a person's life and the effects of LDs impact the mandate of many government ministries, including education, transitions to postsecondary education, sustainable employment, poverty and social assistance, the mental health sector, the justice system and corrections. This is despite the fact that with early identification and diagnosis, the proper accommodations in education and training, and support for individuals and families, people with learning disabilities can become among the most creative, and productive members of society.

**Section 3.02** of the Provincial Auditor's Report addresses issues to do with **Adult Institutional Services (AIS)** within the mandate of the **Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services**.

LDAO **supports** Recommendation 8:

*In order to ensure that inmates with mental illnesses and/or special needs who are not being treated elsewhere are provided with the appropriate levels of support and treatment, the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services should:*

- *Identify the necessary processes and resources to allow for proper assessments and identification of inmates' mental status and special needs;*
- *Identify the need to specialized treatment units in each institution and province-wide to accommodate the estimated number of inmates requiring such treatment, and determine the short- and long-term options for meeting those needs;*
- *Monitor and report on the identified needs of inmates with mental illness and/or special needs and the extent of AIS's facilities and programs for this group to meet their needs.*

LDAO Comments:

Individuals with learning disabilities make up the largest group with 'special needs' within correctional facilities. The 2002 study, *Economic Costs to Individuals, Families and Society* that was prepared by The Roeher Institute for the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) reported research findings of 25% prevalence of learning disabilities among prison populations. Many of these individuals were never identified or diagnosed with LDs and therefore struggled throughout school without understanding why and without receiving the supports they needed to succeed in education or employment.

LDAO Recommendations:

- Because of the high correlation between academic failure and involvement in the justice system, there should be screening for possible learning disabilities in all correctional facilities, and access to psychological assessment for those inmates who may have LDs. With proper assessment of their profile of strengths and processing weaknesses, inmates with LDs could make use of educational upgrading in order to prepare for life in the community.
- There should be opportunities for educational upgrading available in all correctional facilities, and teachers/tutors need to be specially trained to work with inmates who have LDs.

**Section 3.04** of the Provincial Auditor's Report addresses issues in **Child and Youth Mental Health Agencies** of the **Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS)**.

LDAO **supports** Recommendation 1:

*To help ensure that the most appropriate services are provided to those individuals most in need, agencies should work closely with all service providers in their area to ensure that the intent of the policy frameworks of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services are adhered to. Therefore, there should be:*

- *a single point of access or a collaborative placement process for all available residential services and support;*
- *fewer access points or more collaborative efforts to assess and prioritize individual's needs and refer them to the most appropriate non-residential services and support available;*
- *documentation to support the reasons for a particular placement; and*
- *research into best practices for ensuring that a community's schools have the knowledge to be pro-active partners in helping children in need.*

LDAO Comments:

In 2007, the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) released the results of a groundbreaking applied research study, *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)*. PACFOLD summarized data for Ontario from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)*, including: 14.7% of parents of children with LDs said that their child had been diagnosed with emotional, psychological

or nervous difficulties, while parents of children without disabilities reported only 1% of such diagnoses.

The Canadian Council for Learning 2009 report, *A Barrier to Learning: Mental Health Disorders among Canadian Youth*, stated that “co-occurrence rates between learning disability and depression are very high. Depression and anxiety are often a response to the learning disability, especially among girls.”

LDAO Recommendations:

- With such a large correlation of learning disabilities with mental health disorders, it is very important that mental health agencies understand the effects of learning disabilities on children, youth and families.
- There needs to be collaboration among community agencies and particularly between agencies and schools. We agree with MCYS’s response that “To be effective, the collaborative approach will need to include the education sector as well as children’s mental health and be funded appropriately.” LDAO welcomes the Student Support Leadership Initiative undertaken by the Ministry of Education (EDU) in partnership with MCYS to help school boards enhance partnerships with local community agencies to meet the mental health needs of children and youth. Lessons learned from this initiative should be used to develop a sustainable model of partnerships across Ontario.

**Section 3.06** of the Provincial Auditor’s Report addresses issues in **Community Mental Health** under the **Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC)**.

LDAO **supports** Recommendation 2 to MOHLTC:

*To help ensure that people with serious mental illness have consistent, equitable and timely access to community-based services that at appropriate to their level of need, MOHLTC should:*

- *improve provincial co-ordination with the Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) and other ministries, which are involved in serving people with mental illness; and*
- *provide support to the LHINs – particularly in terms of knowledge transfer and data availability – that would enable them to effectively co-ordinate and oversee service providers as intended.*

LDAO Comments:

The 2007 Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) study, *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)*, reported that persons with LDs were more than twice as likely to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, visits to a mental health professional and poorer overall mental health compared to persons without disabilities.

LDAO Recommendation:

- Knowledge transfer to LIHNs should include information about learning disabilities and how effects of LDs interact with mental health diagnosis and treatment.

**Section 3.08** of the Provincial Auditor’s Report addresses issues in the **Employment and Training Division** of the **Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU)**.

LDAO **supports** Recommendations 1, 2 and 3 on Apprenticeship training, particularly the recommendations that MTCU:

- *periodically assess the reasons for which apprentices fail to complete their training and develop strategies to address the reasons identified.*
- *review its resource requirements in field offices and its caseloads to enable training consultants to conduct sufficient and timely site visits to employers and in-school training providers and to better support their apprentices.*
- *monitor in-school pass rates among programs and service providers and compare them to certification examination success rates, and investigate the reasons for significant differences;*
- *periodically survey apprentices about their satisfaction with the quality of in-school and on-the-job training and any additional supports they received from the Ministry; and*
- *research practices in other jurisdictions that have been effective in improving examination pass rates and implement the best practices identified.*
- *develop strategies to attract apprentices to high-demand trades and to help them successfully complete their training.*

LDAO Comments:

Many people with LDs pursue a career in the trades. Youth and adults with LDs often run into roadblocks in apprenticeship training programs when they encounter a lack of awareness and acceptance of their need for accommodations. While the Offices for Students with Disabilities in colleges offer many supports for students with LDs, apprentices are only in the colleges for short academic periods. Many of the employers and unions who provide the on-the-job training for apprentices do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of LDs and the use of accommodations.

LDAO Recommendation:

- In considering reasons for failure to complete apprenticeship training, attention should be paid to the roadblocks that are faced by apprentices with LDs in accessing accommodations in their on-the-job training.

LDAO has **concerns** about Recommendation 13 on LBS programs:

*To obtain adequate information for making appropriate and equitable funding decisions for its Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program and to strengthen accountability, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities should:*

- *report separately on outcomes for clients who exit after assessment without receiving any intensive LBS training, for those who exit the program before and on*

*completion, and—three months after they exit the program—for learners who complete the program;*

- *track and report the length of time learners remain in the program and detect any sites that are carrying learners for unusually long periods; and*
- *implement a funding model that recognizes learner outcomes and better matches funding to service levels provided.*

LDAO Comments:

The 2007 Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) study, *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)*, reported that a significant number of youth and adults with LDs had dropped out of the education system altogether, with over one-quarter of Canadians aged 22 to 29 with LDs reporting less than a high school certificate as their highest academic achievement. Many of these drop-outs eventually end up in LBS programs. In addition, there are individuals in LBS programs who were never identified or diagnosed with learning disabilities, and continue to struggle with literacy and numeracy.

LDAO Recommendation:

- LBS programs need to screen for possible learning disabilities and offer more specialized services for learners who may have LDs, as well as access to psychological assessment of their profile of strengths and processing weaknesses.

Many learners who struggle with identified or unidentified LDs need longer and more intensive LBS training. Therefore we are very concerned about tracking the length of time learners remain in the program, especially if funding is jeopardized when students require longer training.

LDAO Recommendation:

- A funding model for LBS should recognize student *needs* as well as student *outcomes*, or there will be a disincentive to work with more challenging learners.

## **Summary**

Evidence from demographic surveys in both Canada and the United States has documented the long term negative consequences of learning disabilities on physical and mental health, level of education, rates of unemployment, income level and rates of incarceration.

As cited earlier,

- The 2002 study, *Economic Costs to Individuals, Families and Society* that was prepared by The Roeher Institute for the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) reported research findings of 25% prevalence of learning disabilities among prison populations.

- In 2007, the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) released the results of a groundbreaking applied research study, *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)*. PACFOLD summarized data for Ontario from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)*, including: 14.7% of parents of children with LDs said that their child had been diagnosed with emotional, psychological or nervous difficulties, while parents of children without disabilities reported only 1% of such diagnoses.
- The 2007 Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) study, *Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)*, reported that persons with LDs were more than twice as likely to report high levels of distress, depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal thoughts, visits to a mental health professional and poorer overall mental health compared to persons without disabilities.

In addition:

- The Canadian 2006 Participation and Activation Limitation Survey (PALS) showed that persons who reported difficulty learning due to conditions such as dyslexia or attention problems had an unemployment rate of 11.7%, which was higher than other disability groups, and their average employment income was over \$6000 lower than that of the combined disability group.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities in the US reported that:

- Families below the poverty line reported that 4.1% of their children (ages 6-17) have learning disabilities. For families that were not poor, that figure was 2.7%.
- Adults in poverty self-reported their learning disabilities at twice the rate of adults who didn't live in poverty (3.1% vs. 1.5% for adults aged 18-64)
- The unemployment rate for those with LD (5.7%) was twice that of those without LD (2.8%). 39.5% with LD vs. 20.9% without LD reported not being in the labour force.

However the Transitions Longitudinal Study under the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) is demonstrating that outcomes are much more promising for students with learning disabilities who get the supports they need to reach and participate in postsecondary education.

Learning disabilities affect all aspects of a person's life and that of his/her family. Early identification and adequate supports can make the difference between a successful contributor to society or an expensive failure. All provincial ministries, including the Ministries of Community Safety & Correctional Services, Children & Youth Services, Health & Long Term Care, and Training, Colleges & Universities, should develop a better understanding of the potential effects of learning disabilities on the populations they serve. The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario would be happy to help with this educational process.

## References

*Economic Costs to Individuals, Families and Society*, 2002 prepared by The Roeher Institute for the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC).

*Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD)*, 2007, Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario ([www.pacfold.ca/](http://www.pacfold.ca/))

*A barrier to learning: Mental health disorders among Canadian youth*, April 15, 2009, Canadian Council for Learning ([www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL200900415MentalhealthBarrier.htm?Language=EN](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL200900415MentalhealthBarrier.htm?Language=EN) )

*The State of Learning Disabilities*, 2009, National Center for Learning Disabilities, [www.nclld.org/stateofld](http://www.nclld.org/stateofld)

*Participation and Activation Limitation Survey (PALS)*, 2006  
[www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-628-XWE&lang=eng](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?catno=89-628-XWE&lang=eng)

*Transitions Longitudinal Research Study on Learning Disabilities*  
[www.transitionsportal.ca/index.php](http://www.transitionsportal.ca/index.php)