

**AN UPDATE ON THE REPORT OF THE  
INTERMINISTERIAL WORKING GROUP ON LEARNING DISABILITIES, 1992  
Fall 2008**

The Interministerial Working Group on Learning Disabilities was established in 1988. Its mandate was to review the status of persons with learning disabilities in Ontario and recommend to the government of the day a series of steps based on the key findings.

The primary focus was the status of adults with learning disabilities. This was because the group felt that:

*“Children with learning disabilities, for the most part, are supported in the educational system. A wide range of tests are now available to accurately identify and validate the existence of suspected learning disabilities. In accordance with the Education Act, students who are assessed as learning disabled are now entitled to special help and accommodation, which enables them to perform up to their academic potential.”*

Further, the report, in setting its agenda for action, stated, that:

*“In the best of worlds, we would have an education system that provides individualized learning for all children. When that happens, “learning disabilities” may cease to exist. It (the condition) may take its place on the curve of “normal” human experience - like wearing glasses - but until then the problems of older children and adults which have not been addressed in the current system, will need to be addressed through initiatives such as those contained in this report.”*

Obviously, this anticipated step, whether desirable or not, has not happened. In fact, although the educational system still identifies many students as having learning disabilities, many students do not automatically receive all the special help and accommodations that they need. It is recognized that many students with learning disabilities do not perform up to their academic potential. The current trend towards greater “inclusion” is not necessarily in the best interests of all students with learning disabilities.

When it came to determining the status of adults with learning disabilities in Ontario at that time, the *Report* stated that:

*“Inequity is the current reality for people with learning disabilities and those who advocate on their behalf. Systemic discrimination against those with learning disabilities is largely the result of misunderstanding and skepticism. In practical terms, this inequity results in:*

- *lack of access to appropriate assessment services for adults;*
- *lack of focused programming, especially in the areas of vocational training, employment and support;*
- *lack of access to benefits;*
- *lack of access to family support services such as respite care and Special Services in the Home; and*
- *inability of the LDAO to secure access to funds for service delivery and advocacy.”*

The *Report* reviewed programs and services that were provided to persons with disabilities in Ontario at that time and considered whether such programs were equally available to persons with learning disabilities. It identified a number of gaps in policy, service and funding. There were five key findings reported, on the basis of which the Working Group made ten recommendations to government.

The first recommendation was a strategic initiative, namely that all relevant ministries review

their legislation, policies, regulations and program criteria to ensure that all of these specifically reference learning disabilities as a distinct area of disability and identify what action is required to promote equity for persons with learning disabilities. The remaining nine recommendations were directed towards specific ministries and their programming.

### **What has happened since?**

The *Report of the Interministerial Working Group* disappeared from the public domain after the 1995 Provincial election. However, there were some follow up activities which addressed the issues and concerns raised in this *Report*, even though the *Report* itself has not generally been cited, as the basis of or rationale for these initiatives. The only place where such a reference was cited was in the final report of the Learning Opportunities Task Force, released in 2002.

### **Positive outcomes:**

1. The Human Rights Code continues to include learning disabilities in its definition of disability.
2. Persons with learning disabilities have direct access to the Human Rights Tribunal, if they feel that they have faced discrimination on the grounds of their disability. It is important that this access be adequately facilitated, if the person with the learning disability is not represented by legal counsel or an advocate. So far it is not clear to what extent the Human Rights Legal Resource Centre will assist people with learning disabilities to initiate their appeals.
3. The Ontario Disability Support Programs now include psychological assessments as an acceptable verification of disability and therefore eligibility. As a result, persons with learning disabilities are not excluded from eligibility, as had been the case in the past.
4. In 1998, the government established the Learning Opportunities Task Force. On the basis of the LOTF's report and recommendations, there are now two assessment centres in the Province, one at Queen's University and one at Cambrian College, which provide assessment services to students with learning disabilities within the post-secondary sector. Further, each college and university in the Province has a Special Needs Office, which provides services, supports and accommodations to students with learning disabilities, including the availability of Learning Strategists and Adaptive Technologists.
5. A variety of training and licensing programs now provide accommodations to students with learning disabilities to satisfy the requirements for professional accreditation. Examples include the licensing of paramedics, optometrists, lawyers, paralegals. The accommodations are not automatic, but are available if requested. While the accommodation policies of the licensing bodies do not cite learning disabilities in each case, but needed accommodations such as extra time or access to a computer are provided if requested. This certainly represents a significant step forward for those who are proceeding towards such professions in their postsecondary education.
5. LDAO received funding to establish the promoting early intervention project, which led to the development of a new and much more appropriate definition of learning disabilities, a more comprehensive assessment protocol and the Web-Based Teaching Tool, which is widely used throughout the elementary system of Ontario. More recently, funding has been provided to LDAO for the IEP Resource Project for Parents and Students.

## **Areas where the anticipated and/or hoped for changes have not occurred:**

(It is important to note that some program and service areas cited in the *Report*, such as Futures, the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board, etc. have been discontinued.)

1. Most of the Ontario government ministry websites have no current information about learning disabilities or whether the ministries in question have any programs or services, which may be available to persons with learning disabilities.

For example, on the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care's website there is a reference to a 2002 report recommending the development and implementation of appropriate mental health supports and services for persons with learning disabilities. However, there is no information to be found anywhere as to what happened to those recommendations or to the availability of any such focused LD-specific programming through that Ministry.

Although each Ministry has an Accessibility Plan, which may be found on the Ministry's website, the focus of disability-specific accessibility initiatives tends to be on physical disabilities in most cases.

2. The Assistive Devices Program still excludes persons with learning disabilities and does not fund any kind of communication devices.

3. The Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) does not pay for assessment by a psychologist to determine eligibility, and with the new system of funding for ODSP Employment Supports, there is no incentive for agencies to provide assessments in order to plan for appropriate employment. This change has resulted in decreased services for clients with LDs.

4. In spite of the fact that all colleges and universities now provide some, in some cases extensive, services to students with learning disabilities, the website of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has no information about any programming that the Ministry provides or funds for individuals with learning disabilities. In particular, the report of the Learning Opportunities Task Force cannot be found on that Ministry's website or any other government website, including the archives. The report has effectively disappeared. Many of its recommendations have not been implemented, even though the research indicated clearly the potential benefits. Although the longitudinal study, following students who participated in the LOTF pilot projects, has continued, neither the government nor any other group, with the sole exception of Carleton University which hosts the Transitions website, has any of this information available. Interestingly, other jurisdictions in Canada and elsewhere continue to be interested in this research work.

Neither the LOTF report nor the Report of the Interministerial Working Group are available or referenced anywhere on the LDAO website.

5. The *Report* recommended the development of focused programming related to literacy and social skills training for persons with learning disabilities who are in trouble with the law and are incarcerated. I could find no reference to this having been implemented either provincially or federally.

6. Reviewing the literacy and basic skills programs funded by government, I found no references to any current focused programs for persons with learning disabilities. I am sure that there are some, supported by LDAO chapters and others, but the government website has no

up to date listing of any such programs. Disability-specific literacy programs primarily focus on clients who are deaf.

7. The report recommended that LDAO receive funding and the opportunity to provide services to persons with learning disabilities, commensurate with other publicly supported disability organizations, such as the Community Living organizations or the Canadian hearing Society, etc. Clearly, this has not happened.

Although LDAO has been able to access project funding from time to time, there has not been any new legislation or core operational funding provided to expand services to this group of individuals in Ontario.

At the same time, new legislation and funding have been put in place for persons with developmental disabilities. Bill 77 2008: *An Act to provide services and supports to promote the social inclusion of persons with developmental disabilities*, to repeal the Developmental Services Act and to amend certain other statutes received royal assent on October 8, 2008.

I am sure that LDAO welcomes and applauds the spirit of this legislation and realizes that it will benefit persons with developmental disabilities and their families, but what about those who have learning disabilities and their families?

Organizations such as Community Living Ontario continue to be able to count on significant government funding for their operations and are able to provide significant advocacy and service support to their members and the community that they represent. If the recommendations of the Interministerial Working Group had been implemented, LDAO would have been able to provide supports to children and adults with learning disabilities and their families, as needed, throughout the Province.

8. The report recommended that Special Services at Home and Respite Care Services, provided through the Ministry of Community and Social Services, be extended to families who have children with learning disabilities or to adults with learning disabilities, if they can demonstrate the need. This has not happened.

9. Within the Ministry of Education, exceptionality-specific funding and programming has been provided to students with autism and, having recognized the benefits of ABA/IBI, all school boards are now expected to provide such programming for their students. This is clearly beneficial to students who have autism and their families and is the right thing to do.

Funding has been provided to the Integration Action Group to research the benefits of and promote the implementation of inclusion for exceptional students within the secondary panel. Again, this is helpful to students with developmental disabilities and their families and compliments the new legislation.

The implementation of the WBTT is helpful to many students, including many who have learning disabilities. But what about those who continue to be at risk for school failure or are actually failing because they have learning disabilities and are struggling in an inclusive classroom?

Much is known about the benefits of appropriate evidence-based differentiated teaching methods, LD-specific programming and accommodations and exceptionality-specific transition programming for students with learning disabilities. But in many cases these approaches are

not readily available to students with learning disabilities, especially when these students are placed in regular classrooms?

**In conclusion**, there clearly have been some very positive changes in the status of persons with learning disabilities in Ontario since 1992, when the *Report of the Interministerial Working Group on Learning Disabilities* was released.

But have we come far enough? And if not, what can LDAO do now to promote further progress?

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