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Increasing the Odds

A plan to accelerate the diagnosis and treatment of
learning disabilities in New Brunswick

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Introduction

The College of Psychologists of New Brunswick (CPNB) is deeply concerned that children who have been identified with potential mental health and/or learning disorders are not being assessed and diagnosed in a timely manner, which can lead to the development of more complex issues as children get older.

The New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) estimates that the average wait time for assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities within the public system is as high as three years. Learning disabilities like dyslexia (reading disability), dyscalculia (math disability), and dysgraphia (writing disability) need to be diagnosed as quickly as possible to ensure each and every child has the opportunity to meet his or her full potential. Children with undiagnosed learning disabilities are at increased risk for a multitude of problems, including drop-out, illiteracy, unemployment, addiction and criminal justice involvement, and the development of mental health issues.

In 2016, the New Brunswick Health Council reported that New Brunswick had the third highest rate of child and adolescent hospitalization for mental disorders in Canada (and nearly twice as high as Quebec)¹.

Depressive episodes, stress reactive disorders, and behavioural/learning disorders are presently the leading causes of mental illness hospital admissions. The New Brunswick Health Council also reported that only half of children and youth seeking care in the formal health system receive mental health services within 30 days.

Last year the Mental Health Commission of Canada reported that up to three quarters of children and youth do not access services and supports to help them address their mental health concerns.²

There are a multitude of personal and systemic barriers to access. Statistically, higher-income workers with stable employment and private health insurance have the best access to psychological services; however, only 60 per cent of Canadians have some form of private employment-based insurance. This is particularly problematic when you consider that, in 2001, approximately 80 per cent of consultations with psychologists took place within the privately-funded system.

Why do so few consultations occur within the public system? Simply put, recruitment and retention of psychologists within the public sector is a challenge. The current number of vacant psychologist positions in the public sector is alarming, and leads to longer wait times and less access to assessment, diagnosis, and intervention services. In some areas, vacancy rates have reached a tipping point where there are currently more unfilled than filled psychologist positions. Increased workload for remaining psychologists, concerns regarding working conditions, and pay inequity are contributing to more psychologists leaving the public sector, further reducing the public system's capacity to meet the needs of our children. In short, there is a lack of equity in the current health care system, and our children and youth are bearing the burden as a result.

A problem we can't ignore

Timely, accurate assessment and diagnosis is necessary for the early identification of learning disorders and mental health conditions. The prevalence of learning disorders is known to be approximately five per cent, indicating an incidence rate of more than 4,750 students in New Brunswick given current enrollment statistics. This would mean that there are approximately 350 new cases identified each year. Statistically, 60 per cent of these students will have at least one other co-morbid mental health condition. Canadian prevalence rates for mental health conditions are as high as 20 per cent.³ At any given time, there may be as many as 19,568⁴ students in New Brunswick needing mental health treatment.

When mental health conditions and learning disorders are not identified at early stages, serious problems frequently emerge for families, teachers and children themselves. For children, such problems often take the form of depression, anxiety and anger. Delaying the process of assessment and diagnosis also results in increased risks in many areas, such as absenteeism, suspensions, drop-outs, inappropriate behaviour, lack of achievement, and deterioration in general mental health. As such, identifying the source of problems at an early stage is essential for the purpose of collaborating on appropriate treatment plans within the interdisciplinary team.

As stated in the 2004 report *Inclusive Education: A Review of Programming and Services in New Brunswick*, “early identification and early intervention are crucial to long-term success. [It is] recommend[ed] [that]the implementation of a Provincial Learning Disabilities Strategy focused on better and earlier identification of learning disabilities and the provision of appropriate support services within the integrated service delivery framework.”⁵

It is a widely held belief that a failure to identify and address mental health issues at an early age will have long-term economic impacts, both on the individual and on society as a whole. The estimated annual cost of mental illness on the health care system in Canada totals \$7.9 billion. While \$4.7 billion is spent on care, a staggering \$3.2 billion is spent on disability and early death related to mental illness. Canada’s youth suicide rate is the third highest in the industrial world. ***Mental illness is costing Canadians money and lives.***⁶

According to a Mental Health Commission of Canada report, close to 70 per cent of young adults reported that their mental health problems began in childhood or adolescence⁷. Undiagnosed mental health or learning disorders, including ADHD, can lead to other issues such as conduct disorders, anxiety and/or substance abuse disorders as the child ages.

The fact is there are a number of downstream impacts of failing to address mental health issues at an early age, and failing to properly deal with these issues now will only compound the negative impacts on our province in the years ahead. Problems would be expected in the areas of literacy, numeracy, employability, social inclusion/exclusion, and health. This would result in increased costs to government in health, social development and justice and public safety; it would impact the system as a whole. But it doesn’t have to.

The Canadian Medical Association wrote that “effective early childhood development offers the best opportunity reduce the social gradient and improve the social determinants of health, and offers the greatest return on investment.”⁸

Psychologists should have key roles within the New Brunswick Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) framework, particularly in areas of assessment, diagnosis, treatment and consultation. With increasingly complex cases

and co-occurring disorders, comprehensive case conceptualization is required. Moreover, we must match treatment intensity with needs.

Psychologists are uniquely trained to identify effective evidence-based interventions, apply appropriate methods, and assist other members of the inter-disciplinary team in development of individualized case plans. Research conducted over many years has shown that psychological treatment provides significant benefits for approximately 75 per cent of people treated.

Per The Action Plan for Mental Health in New Brunswick: 2011 – 2018, “Mechanisms to enhance the knowledge of all partners are needed. Persons living with mental illness must have current information on their condition and how it is treated as well as government programs and system supports.” As well, per New Brunswick’s Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate, providing school staff with specialized psychological consultation is strongly recommended for: “Improving the level of knowledge and awareness around varying mental illnesses and how they impact a child’s learning, socialization, and behaviour; [and] developing strategies and programs to better integrate and coordinate efforts in providing services to children and youths, particularly those with highly complex needs and Youth-at-Risk.”⁹

How did we get here?

While it could be argued that there are multiple factors that affect timely access to services, ultimately it comes down to the availability of resources, or more accurately, the shortage of resources working within the public system.

According to the Registrar of the CPNB there are 433 Licensed Psychologists working in New Brunswick. Approximately two-thirds identify as working primarily in private practice, while approximately one-third work in the public sector. A recent Global News report suggests that the Government of New Brunswick currently has approximately 31 vacant psychologist positions, and according to the NBTA, 16 of 29 school psychologist positions remain unfilled.

Earlier this year the CPNB conducted a survey of its members and the results indicated that the primary reasons psychologists are either leaving the civil service, or not choosing it as a career option include working conditions and the significant wage gap between public and private sector practices.

Based on current collective agreements¹⁰, public sector psychologists can earn a maximum of approximately \$43 per hour while those working in the private sector can earn a range of \$150 to \$200 per hour. While costs of operating a private practice are higher than the labour costs in the public sector (office rent, supplies, staff, etc.), and people have a variety of individual reasons for choosing to work in the public or private sector, this difference in compensation is certainly hard to ignore.

Another area of note cited in the survey results concerned working conditions in the public sector. Licensed psychologists identified challenges with being able to manage and prioritize their own caseloads, an inability to participate in meaningful professional development activities, and a general lack of understanding of the role of psychologists in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders.

These are significant issues that need to be addressed to protect the integrity of the public system, and ultimately, to best meet the mental health needs of the children and youth the system serves. The Government of New Brunswick should ensure that compensation, career advancement and the legitimate concerns regarding working conditions are addressed in a manner that ensures psychologists want to live and work in New Brunswick, and not pursue opportunities in other provinces. The CPNB is committed to working closely with its membership and in collaboration with the provincial government to improve working conditions on an ongoing basis. It is recognized that this focus should be a continual goal and coincide with any efforts to improve access to psychological services. The long-term success of the public system will be determined by several factors. Improved working conditions will play a vital role in improving recruitment and retention rates.

New Brunswick also has another challenge when it comes to recruitment and retention of new psychology graduates. While the province boasts graduate programs in psychology at both the University of New Brunswick and l'Université de Moncton, there are only two accredited internship

positions available in the province, which means that most students have to leave New Brunswick when it comes time to do their internships.

To become a Licensed Psychologist in New Brunswick, students with a master's degree are required to complete three years of supervised work after completing their studies, while doctoral students are required to complete one year of supervised work pre-graduation and another year post-graduation. The best chance we have of retaining these students in New Brunswick is to provide them with opportunities for employment, which can be achieved through accredited internships.

While there are many advantages to increasing the number of accredited internship positions in the province, perhaps the most significant is the ability to add additional practitioners to our systems, working under the supervision of Licensed Psychologists, at a lower cost. Interns come with well over 1,000 hours of experience, as well as new knowledge, and can effectively work with patients/clients semi-independently under the supervision of a Licensed Psychologist.

How do we fix it?

The College of Psychologists of New Brunswick believes that the solution to these challenges can be found in the strengthening of the Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) approach currently being implemented throughout the province.

The ISD model represents an important step towards meeting the emotional, behavioural and learning needs of children and youth. The CPNB supports the ISD mission and is committed to reducing gaps in the delivery of psychological services for children, youth, and their families across New Brunswick.

Specifically, the CPNB believes that increasing access and decreasing wait times for assessment and intervention are both necessary goals and will be important steps in achieving the ISD vision. Our members are willing and able to assist provincial efforts to strengthen the ISD model and help achieve its mission and vision, while also increasing the role of psychologists as an essential partner in this program.

The fact is until the provincial government is able to adequately address the shortage of psychologists in the public system, our children are going to continue to fall behind. We believe there is a multi-step solution to this challenge that would put children first:

1. As a short-term measure, the province could implement a “hybrid model” of service delivery that engages private-practice psychologists in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of children and youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioural disorders, to address the current lack of resources in the public system.
2. Working closely with stakeholders on an ongoing basis to improve retention of psychologists within the public system, and therefore ensure the demand in the public system for psychological services can be met by psychologists within the public system.
3. Establishing additional internships accredited by the Canadian Psychological Association within the ISD framework for the short-term purpose of resourcing ISD needs, and for the long-term purpose of decreasing public service vacancies.

The first step in the above proposed solution could be implemented very quickly though it is important to view this approach as a temporary measure as it is not cost-effective enough to be pursued as a long-term solution; but is the best solution to ensure our children and youth are assessed, diagnosed and put on a path for treatment in a timely fashion while the provincial government works to secure enough capacity in the public system to adequately meet demand.

Region	ISD Teams	Assessment Psychologists	Treatment Psychologists
MONCTON	10	2	2
SAINT JOHN	9	2	2
FREDERICTON	9	2	2
CHALEUR	4	1	1
ACADIAN PENINSULA	3	1	1
MIRAMICHI	3	1	1
EDMUNDSTON	3	1	1
TOTALS	41	10	10

The path to strengthening our public capacity is to improve recruitment and retention of psychologists, and to increase the number of accredited internship positions available in the province. Improving retention rates of psychologists in the public sector is an important and necessary step toward the long-term success of the public system. An alarming number of vacancies have contributed to a reduction in access to services and reduces the ability of psychologists to adequately meet the demands of their roles. We believe strongly that there needs to be more efforts to evaluate why psychologists are leaving the public system and how we can improve retention. This includes examining pay equity compared to neighbouring maritime provinces, opportunities for career advancement, opportunities for professional development activities, and evaluating working conditions. Identifying further costs in this area will require a collaborative discussion between public service psychologists and the government, to identify and prioritize areas for action.

There are certainly no quick and easy solutions to this problem but with close collaboration, and a strong working relationship with relevant stakeholders, we are optimistic that together we can achieve success.

Establishing internships is another key to improving long-term sustainability. Internships are not without cost, Nova Scotia remunerates psychology interns at a rate of \$35,000 per year. Currently, New Brunswick has only two accredited internship positions offered through the Horizon Health Network in Fredericton¹¹. By effectively, and strategically using internship positions, we can enhance the public system with supervised doctoral students. Training psychology interns in New Brunswick will increase the likelihood that these future psychologists will choose to live and work within our province.

How much will it cost and how do we pay for it?

The proposed solutions we have identified in the previous section do come at a cost, however these solutions are offered in a manner that is consistent with the Government of New Brunswick's own position. Quite simply, "New Brunswick cannot afford to continue under-investing in mental health. By adopting a proactive upstream approach, the provincial

government will be able to reduce the reliance on high-cost services, such as hospitals and specialty care centres.”¹²

Furthermore, the business case for providing psychotherapy indicates that providing access to stepped care cognitive behaviour therapy in Canada could yield \$2 in benefits to society for every \$1 invested.² In addition to intervention, the role of psychologists as consultants to the interdisciplinary team is extremely valuable.

We estimate that the Government of New Brunswick will need approximately 10 full-time equivalent (FTE) private sector psychologists over a period of eight years to reduce the current assessment wait lists to zero, while also keeping up with the need to assess new cases. We base our conclusion on the following:

- Assessments and diagnoses can take on average 20 hours to complete;
- One full-time private sector psychologist can complete approximately 40-50 assessments per year (Assuming working approximately 200 days per year, six billable hours per day, equaling 1,200 hours annually).
- There are approximately 95,000 students in New Brunswick, and assuming a five per cent prevalence rate, we can conclude that there are approximately ±4,750 students with a learning disability in the province, and we estimate that that number will increase by about 350 per year.

We further estimate an additional 10 FTE private sector psychologists will be required to support students going through treatment programs.

There are currently 41 ISD Teams throughout the province, each of which will need adequate psychological resources. For the purposes of this paper, we assume a rough proportional breakdown to determine where resources need to be located, however this can be altered to reflect actual data once it is better understood.

Costs Associated with Short-Term Hybrid Model

The following tables present projected costs associated with utilizing the hybrid model described in the previous section. It assumes the

Contract Psychologist Projections - Assessment						
Region	Teams	Positions	Annual Hours	Evaluations	Consultation Hours (20%)	Annual Cost
MONCTON	10	2	2,400	96	480	\$408,000
SAINT JOHN	9	2	2,400	96	480	\$408,000
FREDERICTON	9	2	2,400	96	480	\$408,000
CHALEUR	4	1	1,200	48	240	\$204,000
ACADIAN PENINSULA	3	1	1,200	48	240	\$204,000
MIRAMICHI	3	1	1,200	48	240	\$204,000
EDMUNDSTON	3	1	1,200	48	240	\$204,000
TOTALS	41	10	12,000	480	2,400	\$2,040,000

Contract Psychologist Projections - Treatment						
Region	Teams	Positions	Annual Hours	Client Hours	Consultation Hours (20%)	Annual Cost
MONCTON	10	2	2,400	1,920	480	\$408,000
SAINT JOHN	9	2	2,400	1,920	480	\$408,000
FREDERICTON	9	2	2,400	1,920	480	\$408,000
CHALEUR	4	1	960	960	240	\$204,000
ACADIAN PENINSULA	3	1	960	960	240	\$204,000
MIRAMICHI	3	1	960	960	240	\$204,000
EDMUNDSTON	3	1	960	960	240	\$204,000
TOTALS	41	10	11,040	9,600	2,400	\$2,040,000

engagement of 20 FTE private-practice psychologists to work through the current wait lists.

More than 4,500 children and youth are waiting for psychological assessment due to the effects of learning disorders, and many more are on wait lists for psychological intervention.

Conclusion

The College of Psychologists of New Brunswick approached this paper with an eye on making sure that every child in New Brunswick has an opportunity to succeed in life. We believe that addressing learning disabilities at the earliest opportunity is the best way to ensure that our province's next generation can reach their full potential, and look forward to doing our part to make that happen, for the good of us all.

End Notes

¹ New Brunswick Health Council. (2016). Children and youth in NB: Looking back to look forward. [Online].

² Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2017). Options for improving access to counselling, psychotherapy and psychosocial services for mental health problems and illness. [Online].

³ Canadian Mental Health Association. (2017). Fast Facts About Mental Illness. [Online].

⁴ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. (2017). Summary Statistics: School Year 2016-2017. [Online].

⁵ Department of Education. (2006). Inclusive education: A review of programming and service in New Brunswick. [Online].

⁶ Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2013). Making the case for investing in mental health in Canada. [Online].

⁷ Canadian Mental Health Association. (2013). Why Investing in Mental Health will Contribute to Canada's Economic Prosperity and to the Sustainability of our Health Care System: Backgrounder - Key Facts. [Online].

⁸ Canadian Medical Association. (2013). Health Equity and the Social Determinants of Health: A role for the Medical Profession. [Online].

⁹ Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate. (2008). Connecting the Dots: A report on the condition of youth-at-risk and youth with very complex needs in New Brunswick [Online].

¹⁰ New Brunswick Union. (2015). Agreement between Board of Management and New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees - Group: Specialized Health Care Professionals. [Online].

¹¹ Horizon Health Network. (2017). Horizon Health. NB Clinical Psychology Internship Program: Fredericton New Brunswick Program Brochure 2018-19. [Online].

¹² Government of New Brunswick. The action plan for mental health in New Brunswick 2011-18. [Online].