

A Window into the Accessibility of Manitoba's Education Systems: From Early Learning and Childcare, through Nursery/Kindergarten to Grade 12 and into Post-Secondary

Executive Summary

In 2017, the Manitoba Government introduced proposed regulations for the Employment Standard under the Accessibility for Manitobans Act. In reviewing the proposal, it became very apparent that one of the greatest barriers to employment for Manitobans with disabilities resulted from their poor educational outcomes and prospects themselves. Without accessible and inclusive education and training, Manitobans with disabilities are at a serious disadvantage when competing for jobs outside of menial or entry level positions.

While a request has been made to government to include an Education Standard with the Accessibility for Manitobans Act, much as Ontario and Nova Scotia have done under their respective accessibility acts, there was clear need to gain a better understanding of the scope and depth of barriers that currently exist in our education systems.

To that end, Education Solutions Manitoba, in conjunction with Barrier-Free Manitoba and with financial support from Community Living Manitoba, developed and implemented three surveys. These surveys collected quantitative and qualitative data relating to the experiences of children, youth and adults with disabilities in Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care, Nursery/Kindergarten to Grade 12, and Post-Secondary levels from the parent, student and education system staff perspective.

Over 600 persons completed one of the surveys. The opinions shared by this large number of respondents provides a rich window into current accessibility issues in our educational systems. Due to methodological limitations, the results are revealing but cannot be considered conclusive.

This Executive Summary provides an overview of the key findings from the surveys.

The human right to an education is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Manitoba's Human Rights Code and the Amendment to the Public Education Act: Appropriate Educational Programming. This right applies to all of Manitoba's

educational systems from early learning and child care, to Nursery/Kindergarten to Grade 12 schooling, and to post-secondary education.

While ELCC and post-secondary education are not mandatory, progress has been made over recent years to increase accessibility to these services. However, not all centres and institutions are accessible to all children/students with disabilities. At the ELCC level, the ability to access qualified staff was seen to be very limited. In the present study, specific barriers cited by those within the ELCC system related to policy/communication issues – especially when working with school-aged children where open sharing of information between the child care centre and school is lacking. Many referred to an expectation that the child care centre address behaviour issues arising during the school day, rather than the school itself. Many also expressed concern regarding the limited funding available for extra support staff and being able to access them in a timely manner.

At the post-secondary level, students with disabilities who apply to and are accepted into programming may access Student Accessibility Services. Roughly one-half of students who had used these services indicated that they were not satisfied with them. Challenges at the post-secondary level most frequently cited by survey respondents referenced instructor/professor attitude, their knowledge of policy and provision of accommodations.

Clearly, at both the ELCC and Post-Secondary levels, more needs to be done to both inform and support staff, parents and children/students regarding accessibility and reducing barriers to participation.

The movement of students from ELCC to N/K to Grade 12 schooling and beyond should be guided by established, multi-departmental government protocols, like the Protocol for Early Childhood Transition and the Bridging to Adulthood protocol cited in the surveys, and yet survey results demonstrated not only a lack of awareness of these protocols, but also a lack of satisfaction with its process by those using it.

The N/K to Grade 12 system is mandatory for all children/youth in Manitoba, aged 7 to 18 years, with the option to extend age of school leaving/graduation to June of the year the student turns 21 years. As such, programming and supports for students with disabilities would be expected to be much more robust.

Results from the surveys shed light on areas where progress has been made (e.g. physical accessibility was cited least as a barrier to education) but there was widespread consensus that more needs to be done, especially when addressing

attitudinal, social, policy and programmatic barriers. These barriers lead to profound social exclusion. The high rates of social exclusion (ranging from 68-72% among respondent groups) and vulnerability to negative consequences including bullying (ranging from 77-92% among respondent groups) must be addressed to ensure students with disabilities can gain an appropriate education that prepares them for further education/training and ultimately for competitive employment.

Certain disability groups reported greater challenges with specific barriers, including those with physical disabilities (physical and transportation barriers), mental health conditions (social, programmatic and transportation barriers), those with autism spectrum disorder (social, policy and programmatic barriers) and those with learning disabilities (policy and programmatic barriers).

One of the hallmarks of inclusive education is placement and programming within neighbourhood schools in the regular classroom with same age peers. Survey results showed specialized classrooms and programs still exist within Manitoba's education system. What was particularly striking was the discrepancy between levels of their reported use between parents and staff. While parents reported significantly higher use ($p < 0.05$) when students presented with intellectual disabilities (54% of parents of students with an intellectual disability reported their son/daughter were in a segregated program), similar rates were not reported by staff.

The survey results also document the reported and widespread inadequacy of many school-based supports required by students with disabilities. Moreover, both the providers and users of the system reported that students faced a wide range of many other barriers throughout Manitoba's educational systems. Most often reported were barriers related to attitude, social exclusion, programmatic limitations and policies.

Basic questions remain: In a province that supports the fundamental human right to education, endorses a philosophy of inclusion and promotes it through its own legislation and policy development, how are the experiences of students with disabilities and their families being monitored to ensure that barriers are effectively identified and addressed? How are barriers to this human right, especially those discussed in this report, being dealt with so that all Manitobans understand and appreciate the critical role that access to quality education plays in supporting a more equitable future for all?