CNIB's response to "For the Parents" consultation: education in Ontario

CNIB welcomes the provincial government's invitation for feedback on the education system in Ontario. Parents, students, educators, interested individuals and organizations have been advocating to improve the education system to ensure students who are blind or partially sighted have opportunities to thrive developmentally and academically at every stage of their education. While progress has been made in some areas, students who are blind or partially sighted continue to have poorer educational outcomes and lower graduation rates compared to their sighted peers. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests children and youth with sight loss experience significant academic and social exclusion at school.

Nearly 100 parents, students, special education professionals and members of the sight loss community have provided feedback through CNIB's consultations on the topics set out by the Ministry of Education. The detailed feedback from our discussions falls broadly into five recommendations:

1. **Ensure assistive technology, including mainstream technology, in the education system is standardized.** Who the school board does business with and how much the school board is willing to/able to spend should not prevent students with sight loss from accessing the accessible technology that's required for their education.
2. **Review the standard curriculum design, including visual concepts, to ensure its more inclusive.** While this is most relevant for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) classes, it should be applied to physical education, life skills and financial literacy as well.
3. **Improve professional development standards and encourage more people to become Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI).** Work with the sight loss community to develop and implement practical regulatory solutions.
4. **The Ministry of Education should** adopt procurement practices that mandate mainstream technology in schools and standardized tests are accessible. Accessibility benefits everyone – it simplifies the system and saves money by reducing the need to purchase expensive specialized equipment.
5. **The Ministry should have an ombudsman outside of the school board**. This will provide parents with an impartial process to follow when their child is not being fully accommodated.

## **Full Response**

## **1. Improving student performance in** [**Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM**](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/min_math_strategy.html)**)**

**"The assumption when teaching [science, technology, engineering and math] courses is that the student can see. Things are set up for people with sight. There are not enough tools for people who are blind or partially sighted."**

**Challenge**: There are additional barriers (up to and including forced "opt-out" from STEM courses) for students with sight loss studying STEM subjects as they deal with more visual and abstract concepts.

**Solutions**:

* Each curriculum needs to be redesigned to be more inclusive of different learning strategies that are independent of sight. Curriculum designers and teachers should take advantage of professional development resources and opportunities.
* Teachers should incorporate more hands on/tactile techniques to help students learn these concepts, rather than relying on a textbook. Incorporating various hands-on methods makes learning more engaging for all students.

**Challenge**: It is difficult for students with sight loss to translate mathematic and scientific information, as many TVIs don't know Nemeth Code (braille system used for mathematics) and some screen readers (text-to-speech technology) don't properly read mathematical formulas or scientific symbols. Access to diagrams and visual information is difficult – few teachers have the necessary skills to relay information in a way that is accessible.

**Solutions**:

* TVIs need more specialized training to help translate scientific and mathematic information for students.
* Parents and students provided feedback that more modern methodologies of learning math are more effective for students with sight loss, when compared to traditional methods.

**Resources:**

* ["Creating a culture of accessibility in the sciences"](https://www.elsevier.com/books/creating-a-culture-of-accessibility-in-the-sciences/sukhai/978-0-12-804037-9) provides insights and advice on integrating students with disabilities into the STEM fields.
* [Tactile Excel sheets and graphics to boost job prospects for blind people](https://horizon-magazine.eu/article/tactile-excel-sheets-and-graphics-boost-job-prospects-blind-people.html) – Horizon, The EU Research & Innovation Magazine

## **2. Preparing students with job skills, such as** [**skilled trades**](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/morestudentsuccess/SHSM.html) **and coding**

**"Placements for students with sight loss depends on what placement can be found, rather than finding a placement that would provide the actual skills and career preparation and learning that the student desires."**

**Statistic**: Only 28 per cent of working-age adults with sight loss are employed full time. Access to co-op placements is a significant contributor to successful employment for people who are blind or partially sighted.

**Challenge:** Employers don't know how to accommodate a student's disability for co-ops or internship placements, or they're unwilling because of unfounded "health and safety" concerns based on social assumptions about disability. This means that the student ends up being heavily restricted in their placement options, or they're not able to participate in the co-op/internship at all. This lack of vocational experience puts students with sight loss at a major disadvantage when they are ready to enter the workforce.

**Solutions:**

* Employers should be incentivized to employ an intern with a disability via an accommodation fund.
* Schools and school boards need to partner with sight loss organizations and experts to provide workplace assessments and accommodations for co-op placements to fully support students – it will provide a seamless process for the employer and employee.
* Programs should have mandatory training for placement organizations about supporting a student/employee with a disability.
* Additional orientation and mobility support should be offered outside of regular lessons to support the student in their new environment before their placement.

**Resources:**

* [Blindness at Work](https://www.cnib.ca/en/sight-loss-info/blindness-work?region=on)
* [Come to Work](https://www.cnib.ca/en/programs-and-services/work?region=on)
* [EmployAbility PSA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWdCFltBUl8)

## **3. Improving provincial** [**standardized testing**](http://www.eqao.com/)

**"Braille using students often do not get the test in braille. It is oral and that can be quite fatiguing."**

**Statistic:** Only 65 per cent of youth who are blind or partially sighted graduate from high school, compared to 81 per cent of their sighted peers**.**

**Challenges**:

* Because of a lack of accessible options (i.e., braille, electronic versions), a student is required to take an oral version of the test, even if this is not the method of examination they are used to, which takes longer and can be fatiguing. The examination also becomes more of a measurement of how much oral information the student can remember, rather than proficiency in the topic of the exam.
* Often, scribes/exam helpers are people that the student has not worked with before and they might describe the information in a different manner to how the student was taught, (e.g. describing a tactile graph).
* Additionally, the scribe is often not a subject-matter expert on the topic of the examination. This poses the risk that the scribe writes the answer inaccurately as they do not fully understand the student or the subject.

**Solution**: The government should adopt a procurement practice to purchase standardized examinations that are accessible; the request for proposal to vendors should highlight inclusive design requirements, electronic formats, so the student is able to take the test independently on their regular assistive technology device (ensuring anti-cheating checks are in place) at the same time as their peers. The academic success of a student should not be affected by how well someone else can write the answer for them, if they are able to take the exam independently and without a scribe.

## **4. Ensuring students graduate with important life skills, including** [**financial literacy**](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/financial.html)

**"Social skills are the determining factor as to how successful someone will be in their life and career."**

**Statistic:** A third of parents of children who are blind or partially sighted say their child has never received birthday or other party invitations.

**Challenge**:Some schools in the province have orientation and mobility (O&M) professionals working in the school system, but not independent living specialists (ILS). This means students have to learn valuable life skills, that should be incorporated into the education system, during PA days or on the weekend.

**Solution:** Look at union rules and the barriers for ILS entering the school system in certain areas of the province, and work with ILS providers such as Vision Loss Rehabilitation Ontario to ensure ILS skills are taught to students with sight loss as part of their education.

**Challenge**: The Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) is an excellent framework for students with sight loss to learn valuable life skills, but there are not always the resources in place to deliver the ECC.

**Solution**: The ECC should be supported by all specialized and mainstream educators and professionals who interact with the student, and adequate time and resources given to deliver it. Life skills that relate to all children, not just those with disabilities, should be integrated into the mainstream curriculum. Schools could also partner with disability organizations that offer summer camps that teach life skills – their attendance could count towards their credit.

Community members also gave feedback that life skills taught to students with sight loss shouldn't just be about sight loss – they should have real applications that will assist students in becoming fully independent adults.

## **5. Managing the use of technology in classrooms, such as cell phones**

**"Technology and assistive technology are the equalizers. Students with sight loss should be able to participate in the selection of technology being ordered through SEA (Special Equipment Amount) claims, rather than being told which technology they will have access to. If a student who is blind works best with Apple technology, they should be encouraged to use the technology that works for them."**

**Statistic**: 46 per cent of adults with sight loss do not own a smartphone or tablet from which they can access the internet (compared to less than 10 per cent of sighted). Those that do rarely have the latest models that can support the full suite of accessible apps.

**Challenges**:

* The Ministry of Education has deferred the administration of accessible technology to school boards. This means that available technology varies from region to region, with some school boards only offering technology manufactured by certain companies, regardless of what is best for the student.
* Because it is classed as school property, students are not permitted to take their accessible technology home with them, which means the ability to complete their homework depends on whether their family can afford to buy them a device.
* Similarly, in the classroom, technology isn't always mobile, so it is often stored somewhere away from the classroom, which creates a social and educational divide between a student and their peers.

**Solutions**:

* We need a standardized provincial system for the procurement and deployment of accessible technology – it should not be left to school boards to decide what is best for the student.
* Functional vision assessments should be carried out by a recognized specialist that’s independent of the school board. Based on the assessment recommendations, technology should be tailored to the student. It should be based on need, not on contracts and what the school is willing to make available to the student.
* A system should be created whereby students are permitted to take their assistive technology home to support their studies.
* The Ministry should consider partnerships with sight loss/assistive device organizations to enable a student to borrow equipment ahead of the government/school board committing to purchase it, if the parent and student choose.

**Challenge**: Teachers don't always understand how an assistive device works or the student's accessibility needs. For example, some students have been told that they're not allowed to record their lesson to help them learn because of the teacher's union rules.

**Solution**: If a student has a genuine need to record a lesson for accessibility reasons, they should be permitted to do so with all the necessary privacy and legal framework in place. We also need professional development for teachers to learn more about assistive devices – currently, there is no incentive for teachers to do so.

## **6. Building a new age-appropriate** [**Health and Physical Education curriculum**](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/health.html) **that includes subjects like mental health, sexual health education and the legalization of cannabis**

**"Youth with sight loss are often excluded from physical education as it is seen as too risky. This may also result in them missing out on health classes, which are generally lumped in with physical education. This may mean youth are missing out on sexual education, healthy eating, and information on alcohol and drug risks."**

**Statistics**: Research shows individuals with sight loss are less physically active than their sighted peers, including their peers with other disabilities.

* 77 per cent of children with sight loss do not belong to clubs.
* 74 per cent of children with sight loss do not play sports.
* Youth who are engaged in out-of-school activities tend to have better academic results, which increases their chances of finding employment and becoming economically secure.
* Individuals with sight loss who participate in team-oriented community engagement activities (e.g., team sports) are more than 2.5 times more likely to have a full-time job.

**Challenge**: Teachers don't know how to make activities accessible. Often, the physical education teacher is also the teacher of other subjects.

**Challenge**: Often, there are multiple barriers to students with sight loss participating in sports at school. Due to social assumptions, these activities are often judged as a low priority for students with sight loss – students are often taken out of physical education activities to catch up on other subjects. Some educators and schools are concerned that students who are blind or partially sighted are a liability because they might get injured.

**Solutions**:

* Teachers can make easy adaptations to physical education programs with weights, ropes and other tactile exercises that aren't as visually-based
* Introduce adapted/blind sports into mainstream school activities. Schools should consult with blind sports and sight loss organizations about adaptative equipment that can make physical education more accessible, especially if there is a child with sight loss in the class.

**Resources:**

* [Ontario Blind Sports Association](https://blindsports.on.ca/)
* [Meet the Toronto Blind Jays, Canada's only blind baseball team](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/docproject/you-re-looking-at-canada-s-only-beep-ball-team-1.4832154/meet-the-toronto-blind-jays-canada-s-only-blind-baseball-team-1.4832156)
* Sudbury high school holds first goalball tournament

## **7. Developing the first-ever** [**Parents’ Bill of Rights**](https://news.ontario.ca/opo/en/2018/08/ontarios-government-for-the-people-respecting-parents-by-holding-unprecedented-consultation-into-education-reform.html)

Parents who responded to our consultation had the following feedback for a Parents' Bill of Rights.

* The Parents' Bill of Rights needs to be accessible and understandable by all and without any jargon. It should not be a written in "legal policy speak".
* A Parents' Bill of Rights must take the rights of parents who have a child with a disability into account. The system should be a partnership between all involved to work together to get the best outcomes for the student.
* Even though the [Ministry of Education's website](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/individu.html) states "An IEP (Individual Education Plan) must be developed with input from the parent(s)/guardian(s)", many parents voiced their concerns that they only received a copy of the IEP from the school – they're simply asked to sign it. The rights of parents being involved in this process needs to be strengthened.
* It should be legally mandated that parents are informed of what their rights are if they have a child with a disability, and they should know what support and resources are available to their child.
* Parents should have the right to ongoing and regular updates about their child's progress in all areas of their education, including the ECC.
* Parents should have the right to know who their child's Education Assistant (EA), O&M and TVIs are to foster regular and ongoing communication as to what they are doing and how it is supporting the student and the classroom teacher.
* There is no clear way to register concerns for non-compliance to IEPs. The Ministry should introduce an Ombudsman outside of the school board, so there's a process to follow when a child isn't been fully accommodated. We welcome the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) update to their policy on ["Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities"](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-accessible-education-students-disabilities), but simple matters around accommodations shouldn't need to become a human rights complaint. Under the current system, some parents fear reprisals if they complain to the school or school board, so there needs to be an independent system – one that is communicated and easy to understand.

CNIB welcomes further discussion with the Ministry of Education on these issues and how we can work together to improve educational outcomes for students who are blind or partially sighted in Ontario.

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