

Report on the Review of the Service Delivery Model for Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA)

Executive Summary

Background

APSEA engaged the services of Marian Fushell and Bob Gardiner (“the reviewers”) to conduct a review of its Service Delivery Model. The terms of reference focused on how well APSEA programs and services; (i) meet the needs of its learners and families, (ii) were accessible and equitable, (iii) recognized cultural and linguistic diversity and (iv) aligned with inclusive education policies and practices of the four Atlantic Provinces. The review was conducted between November 2021 and April 2022. It engaged with APSEA senior leadership, staff (i.e., itinerant teachers, non-teaching APSEA staff and APSEA provincial supervisors) and key stakeholders (i.e., learners, families, school-based personnel, community partners, district/ regional staff). Senior leadership participated in interviews with the reviewers and all key stakeholders were invited to complete a survey. The survey results were reviewed and used in the development of a discussion guide for focus groups. Those that received the survey were also invited to participate in the focus groups. In addition, the reviewers examined several key documents relevant to APSEA and conducted a jurisdictional review which examined service delivery models, with a focus on Atlantic Canada (however did review several other jurisdictions), for students who are blind or visually impaired and Deaf or hard of hearing. The full report provides an in-depth review of the process and its findings. This document is intended to serve as a brief overview of the review and provide a snapshot of the strengths, challenges identified, and the opportunities presented. We encourage you to read the full report for a more comprehensive understanding of the review.

Strengths

Overall, vast majority of respondents to the surveys and focus groups very positive and supportive of the work being carried out at APSEA. Strengths include, support received from itinerant teachers and other program staff for students who are BVI and DHH, communication and collaboration, and the establishment of DHH and BVI mentors.

Challenges/ Opportunities

As is common with most reviews, challenge areas are examined, and pathways forward identified. The report concludes that APSEA is meeting the needs of students and families that use its programs and services and that there is a high degree of satisfaction with APSEA. The report identified emergent themes and identified areas for improvement based on the challenges identified. There are eight challenge areas identified with nineteen recommendations to support:

Challenge: *Itinerant teachers are at the core of APSEA's positive impact on students; however, due to the model of delivery, including travel time required to reach students across geography, they often spend much of their time in transit to students, thus limiting in-person time with students.*

Recommendation:

1. APSEA articulate targets for reduced travel time for APSEA itinerant teachers.
2. APSEA itinerant teachers each develop a plan that incorporates face-to-face and virtual sessions so that travel time is reduced by their pre-determined target.
3. APSEA develop an overall professional learning plan that includes annual/biannual opportunities for APSEA staff and district/regional/school colleagues to assemble, complemented by virtual learning opportunities.

Challenge: *Educational Psychologist expertise are difficult to retain, in addition a collaborative team approach better benefits students when implementing recommendations from assessments.*

Recommendation:

4. APSEA work with the Executive Committee to seek an arrangement to have at least one school/educational psychologist in each district/region assigned as a lead person for psycho-educational assessments for students who are DHH and another for students who are BVI.
5. APSEA adopt a collaborative model for the administration of psycho-educational assessments with a team comprising the school based/district/regional school/educational psychologist, APSEA itinerant teachers and other program support staff, a speech language pathologist, and other professionals as required.

Challenge: *APSEA is well known and respected for its services for students who are DHH and BVI; the AIE partnership is valued, and the review has asked to consider other areas of special education that may be able to be addressed.*

Recommendation:

6. APSEA conduct a needs assessment to determine if there are other areas of student services (special education) that can be addressed effectively, using a model similar to its AIE partnership.

Challenge: *The review (and research collected) clearly supports and articulates the merits of short-term programs, and the value students receive from face to face/ peer to peer interaction and learning. However, it was identified that the current service delivery model presents several challenges and is inadequate to meet the needs of most learners. Accessibility, travel time, loss of instructional time and parents' inability to miss work are barriers to participation. It was also found that the Virtual Learning Series has improved accessibility but has limitations when it comes to engagement, meeting learning outcomes and of course in-person student connections.*

Recommendations:

7. The outcomes for expanded core curriculum (ECC) that are not delivered by the APSEA itinerant teachers be examined to determine those that are best achieved through in-person learning and those that can effectively be delivered virtually.
8. The current STP and VLS programs be reviewed with a view to having a high-quality program that supports student learning in all ECC outcomes. Elements of the review can include but not be limited to: coherence with the outcomes, duration, intensity, age- and grade-appropriateness, placement, and delivery mode.
9. Once a review of ECC and the current programs (e.g., STPs, VLS) has been completed, establish a new program/model that provides diverse and multiple opportunities for students to experience both in-person and virtual programming relevant to their needs.
10. APSEA provide in-person program offerings (APSEA Centre, regionally, summer camps, post-graduate transition extended program) to ensure students who are DHH and BVI can connect and socialize with other students with similar experiences.
11. In extenuating circumstances when travel and community isolation prevent a student's participation in an in-person program, APSEA avail of the technology, to the extent possible, to allow the student to engage virtually.

Challenge: *When students transition from high school to work or postsecondary, concern around orientation and mobility training for students who are BVI was raised. Specifically, for those relocating from rural to urban, and for students who are DHH, access to ASL. Itinerant teachers, support staff and school planning teams were highlighted as being the most informed about students' preparedness for making these transitions from high school.*

Recommendation:

12. APSEA itinerant teachers and other program support staff, as appropriate, collaborate with school personnel and meet with graduating students and their families to evaluate the readiness of the student to move into a workplace or postsecondary education.
 - a. If the student is ready to move forward, APSEA itinerant teachers, in collaboration with school personnel, set up a meeting between the receiving workplace or postsecondary institution to facilitate the transition.
 - b. If the student is not ready to make the transition, APSEA itinerant teachers, in collaboration with school personnel, review options and develop a transition plan.

Challenge: *Programs and services for pre-school children and families present scheduling challenges with working parents.*

Recommendation:

13. APSEA provide flexible scheduling options for programs for pre-school children and their families.

Challenge: *Awareness (or lack of awareness) of cultural and linguistic diversity can impact the services APSEA provides.*

Recommendation:

14. In future hirings, APSEA continue to strive for cultural and linguistic diversity among APSEA staff.
15. APSEA carry out a review of its library holdings with the goal of making its collection more diverse.
16. APSEA work collaboratively with community-based organizations, first language ASL signers, and francophone school districts to provide improved services.

Challenge: *APSEA's programs and services strive to complement the provincial inclusive education policies of each of the Atlantic provinces. It has been noted that in some cases services provided by APSEA aren't considered in conjunction with provincial policies and practices. APSEA services and provincial services should be better aligned.*

Recommendations:

17. Provincial representatives (department and district/regional) together with APSEA senior staff (i.e., superintendent, directors, supervisors) establish a process for the development, implementation, and monitoring of school-level program planning for students who receive support from APSEA that includes:
 - a. the inclusion of APSEA staff at program planning meetings for students;
 - b. professional learning to clarify understanding of both the APSEA structure and the provincial inclusive education policies and tiered models; and
 - c. a communication strategy for parents and community partners.
18. APSEA monitor the outcomes of the common service delivery plan project started in a number of locations with a view to adoption of best practices.
19. APSEA senior management provide all APSEA staff with information about provincial inclusive education policies and practices, and use staff meeting time to help ensure understanding with respect to how to align APSEA's service delivery model with provincial inclusive education policies and practices.

While outside the terms of reference for the work completed, two other areas of concern were identified: communications and staff shortages. Respondents indicated that the past few years have seen a lot of change which has left some staff concerned about the future. While most are supportive of change, they stressed the need for it to be accompanied by open communication and transparency around decision-making and future plans. A change management plan was suggested as a possible solution.

With respect to staffing shortages, growth in needs for funding and human resources present challenges for having a sustainable system. In addition, more support for Deaf culture was

identified as an issue. A suggestion to address shortages was to implement a promotion plan for people to be trained in supporting people to be trained in BVI and DHH.

Next steps

APSEA accepts the general intent of the recommendations outlined in the report resulting from the review of the service delivery model. APSEA leadership is reviewing all recommendations and will work with individual staff teams to create an implementation plan that addresses the recommendations/challenges identified in the review.