



MEDIA RELEASE

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Lack of Recognition of a Common Childhood Disorder in Canadian Schools Results in Inequity for some Students

Although Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one the most common neurodevelopmental (psychiatric) disorders causing learning impairment in Canadian students, ADHD has not been officially recognized as such by Ministries of Education and the Canadian government. This has resulted in inconsistency across provinces and within school boards and caused inequity for students with ADHD, even though ADHD is recognized as a disability by many Human Rights Commissions.

With the release of a newly published paper, “Inequitable Access to Education for Canadian Students with ADHD”, the Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada (CADDAC) is launching a national awareness and advocacy campaign focusing on ADHD in Education. This paper will be shared with Ministries of Education across Canada hoping to draw attention to this neglected issue. CADDAC is also asking parents of children with ADHD to speak out, share the experiences of their children in Canadian school systems, through a national survey.

“Many educators don’t realize how significantly ADHD can impact learning”, says Dr. Rosemary Tannock a world renowned researcher in the field of ADHD and learning. “Ministries of Education, school boards and many teachers’ colleges have failed to keep up with current medical research on ADHD and how it affects learning. We see an 8%-10% decline in literacy, numeracy and academic attainment in these students as well as a three-fold increase in high school dropout. This occurs despite that fact that these students have average or above average intellectual abilities and the capacity to learn and go onto post-secondary education.”

While provinces using a system of identification officially identify students with less common disabilities as exceptional learners, securing their rights to special education resources, they do not identify students with ADHD even though they comprise at least 5% of their student population. Although Ministries and school boards using this system repeatedly state that identification is not dependant on a diagnosis, but rather the level of need and that students with ADHD do not require an official identification to receive the help they require or access an individual education plan (IEP), or support plan, parents would disagree. Statements that parents have received from school board administrators: we never identify students with ADHD as exceptional learners in this board; ADHD is not a formal

diagnosis in the TDSB. Does your son have another diagnosis on his assessment; the level of support is determined by the diagnosis as well as academic challenges.

A student's education plan is meant to define a student's special learning needs and document accommodations and strategies to assist a student's learning. Without formal identification which makes an IEP a legal must, the implementation of an IEP is at the discretion of a school principal, who may have received no training in ADHD years ago. Other provinces which do not use a system of identification, but rather mandate principals to meet special students' needs assume that principals will be able to recognize learning impairments caused by a complex neurodevelopmental disorder that they have not been trained to understand. A parent who wishes to remain anonymous shares this story, "After moving to a new school I met with the principal to discuss my son's IEP and other supports, I was shocked when he told me that they wouldn't be giving him any support. In fact, the principal informed me they wouldn't be honouring his IEP and he would be removing it. I told him he couldn't do that and his response was "watch me".

"There is little consistency across the country, within provinces or even within school boards, as to which students with ADHD receive the help they need, says Heidi Bernhardt, the Executive Director and President of CADDAC, "There are however common themes that continually come up when we receive calls and e-mails from parents; they are told that, ADHD does not qualify their child for identification as an exceptional learner unless the child also has an additional disorder that is on the list or that their child is not "impaired enough" for identification or even an IEP but what this benchmark might be is not defined. There is one additional message that parents continually share; when a principal and the teacher understand ADHD and how it affects a student's learning and behaviour it makes all the difference in the world. If this occurs, class room teaching strategies, accommodations and sometimes even formal identification is more likely to follow, regardless of a board's policy.

Even though teachers have at least 1 to 3 students with ADHD in their classroom every year, in most cases they only receive superficial education on ADHD, which is rarely up-dated through in-service education programs. Many are unaware of specialized teaching strategies, beneficial to all students, but essential for those with ADHD. "Most teachers just don't 'get' ADHD, says another parent in the Ontario school system who would like to stay anonymous, "They think these kids as just being lazy and wilful. We can tell if we are going to have a good year or a bad year after the first few weeks of school, depending solely on the teacher's understanding of ADHD".

What the public, government and parents of students without ADHD need to realize is that when the needs of students with ADHD go unrecognized and unsupported these students do not quietly disappear into the school population. Due to their medical symptom profile, when educators are not trained to proactively implement appropriate strategies, these students can drain school resources, potentially resulting in negative outcomes for everyone in that class. Even more worrisome, are reactive school interventions such as time spent in the office, barring students from recess or class trips, suspensions, and a reduction of school hours. Treating these students as if they had control over their medical disability, choosing to be inattentive, impulsive, hyperactive and emotionally reactive is hugely detrimental and discriminatory to these students. "My son's report cards have consistently stated that he would perform better if he would 'focus more', demonstrating a distressing lack of understanding of ADHD, as if focus is something he can just choose to turn on. Yet with minor accommodations, my son

would have the ability to be successful in school. My child should have the exact same rights to resources as other students with disabilities that may be more visible or better understood,” says Cheryl Connors the mother of a 17 year old student in Ontario.

CADDAC and parents of children with ADHD are asking governments to consider this, “If we are going to deplete valuable school resources would they not be best spent proactively applying appropriate accommodations and proven teaching methods leading to better outcomes for all?”

“We receive calls from frustrated, distressed parents from across the country on a continuing basis complaining that they are unable to receive support for their children with ADHD in Canadian schools. But even more upsetting are calls describing the cruel treatment some of these children are subjected to, often by educators who may be well meaning, but ill informed. However, parents are still very reluctant to speak out about these issues, especially to the media” says Bernhardt, “People still misunderstand children with ADHD and can be very judgemental. What parent would want to speak out just to be labelled a bad or lazy parent, make their child a poster child for ADHD and subject them to negative feedback or possibly retaliation from the school?”

So, parents live in isolation afraid to voice their frustrations out loud. CADDAC would like to change this. While we have huge amounts of anecdotal data in this area, we would like to quantify and qualify the educational experiences of families across Canada dealing with ADHD. To accomplish this CADDAC has launched a nationwide [survey](#) on ADHD in Canadian Schools. In addition, CADDAC is asking parents to send us an e-mail to advocacy@caddac.ca sharing their experiences, good and bad. Our hope is that this will remove the anxiety about speaking out and allow parents to share their frustration and experiences, anonymously.

Our message to parents, “If you want change to happen, it is time to speak out!” even anonymously. This will assist CADDAC in advocating for your child with ADHD.

I’m choosing to speak out says Carole Eros, a parent from BC, “I’m frustrated with teachers who clearly have little knowledge of ADHD and limited skills in dealing with this disorder, yet have strong opinions that are offensive and contradict the advice we receive from our medical and psychological experts on how to support my son. My son went from thriving personally and academically one year to demonstrating increased anxiety, reduced self-esteem and not wanting to attend school after having such a teacher the following year.

To speak with Heidi Bernhardt, Dr. Tannock or parents across the country willing to be interviewed about the lack of equity their children with ADHD face in Canadian School systems contact:

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