

## ADHD in Canadian School Systems: one step forward, one back and one inadequate – so where do we go from here?

By Heidi Bernhardt

### **BC Ministry of Education Changes in Special Education Guidelines around ADHD**

During our meeting with the BC Ministry of Education on November the 10<sup>th</sup> we were informed that great changes were about to happen in the recognition of learning impairments of students with ADHD. ADHD will now be recognized in the new special education guidelines under a category. ADHD will be placed in the “Q” Category (Specific Learning Disorder) in the draft version of Section E of the policy manual. ADHD without a co-morbid condition will be included in this category however ADHD with a comorbid condition, say ADHD with ASD, will be more likely designated in Category G. In general, this means that a student with ADHD and no other disorder, who presents with learning needs, would now qualify for an IEP. These changes were made due to recent changes in the DSM 5 which now recognizes ADHD under the neurodevelopmental disorder category rather than the behaviour disorder category.

CADDAC has been advocating for this change for many years now. In 2010 we published our [report card](#) on provincial Ministry of Education recognition of ADHD students and assigned BC, Ontario and Quebec all failing grades. Their systems barred students with ADHD and no other disorder from being recognized as exceptional students thereby not qualifying for special education resources. We last met with the BC Ministry of Education in the fall of 2014. At that time we requested this change as we have for all the provinces, so were obviously thrilled with this news.

The remaining barrier to students with ADHD receiving the teaching strategies and accommodations they require will be ensuring that BC educators truly understand ADHD as a neurodevelopmental disorder; that they are up to speed on all the new research on how ADHD impacts learning, executive functioning impairments and behaviour; and that they are trained on appropriate teaching and classroom strategies. While this is the same barrier we face right across the country, with this change teachers in BC may be more motivated to seek out this knowledge. CADDAC will be keeping in touch with as many BC ADHD medical experts and educators as possible, sharing our resources and offering our time and expertise to help make this happen.

### **The Rest of Canada**

Since the recent changes in DSM 5, new research that clearly indicates that ADHD on its own (without a learning disability) significantly impairs learning, and this change in BC, CADDAC sees an opportunity to renew our advocacy on this issue with all provinces.

In December of 2011 the Ontario Ministry sent out a [memorandum](#) that was meant to address the fact that students with ADHD were still being barred from being recognized as exceptional learners through an IPRC (Identification, Placement, Review Committee). Once identified the “right” to special education resources kicks in. However, most boards still refuse to IPRC, (formally identify students with ADHD as exceptional learners) many still refuse to develop IEPs (Individual Educational Plans) and the training for educators on ADHD remains dismal. The Ministry in Ontario still refuses to include ADHD under a category of exceptionality like BC just did. They confirm that boards are allowed to set their own level of the bar on how impaired a student must be to qualify for an IEP yet do not ask boards to supply any documentation on where this bar sits. They also admit they have no way to hold board accountable on any of this.

This has led to an extreme lack of consistency across the province and even boards. Two students with the same diagnosis and learning profile may receive totally different resources from one school to another. When I am asked by parents to suggest schools that are better at meeting the needs of students with ADHD my response is that it generally depends on the level of ADHD knowledge and understanding of the principal. Unfortunately principals and school administrators, like their teachers, are not trained on ADHD. Often, a true understanding only occurs after some personal exposure to ADHD through their child, a friend or relative’s child, or was acquired through a background in special education. After years of advocacy work on the research chair’s part at OISE only a half hour of education on ADHD now exists for their teachers in training. Every class they teach for their entire career will include at least 2 or 3 students with ADHD. We run full day workshops for educators and feel that we are only scratching the surface.

The situation in Quebec remains the same as it did in Ontario and BC in 2010. ADHD is not included in a category of exceptionality essentially barring students with ADHD as being recognized as exceptional learners.

Alberta who received a “good” rating in our 2010 report cared, due to the fact that they recognized ADHD under a category, would now be down-graded to a fair or fail. They are moving away from a system of identifying students with learning needs to a system of “inclusion” where students with these learning needs are not officially identified but rather meant to just have their needs met. (More on that later) In the past year or two I have received more calls from parents in that province expressing dismay at not being able to access an IEP or other resources. Alberta which partially funds private education if required for special needs has a different coding system across the public, charter, and private school systems. In the public system diagnoses aren’t tied to funding anymore, which seems to be leading to a lack of motivation in identifying needs. Designated Special

Education Private Schools (DSEPS) who rely on coding have been given mixed messages about ADHD over the years, but generally ADHD alone is not sufficient for coding while a diagnosis of an LD is.

As to the system of Inclusion that all other provinces use, it sounds great, however there is one significant underlying issue that often derails the implied intent of this system. When one relies on a system where schools are simply mandated to meet the needs of a student with learning needs the entire system hinges on educators being able to recognize the behaviours they see in a student with ADHD as a learning impairment. Will issues with attention regulation, impulsivity and hyperactivity, self-regulation, emotional regulation, executive functioning, the inability to get work done accurately and on time be seen as a learning need caused by a neurodevelopmental disorder or rather interpreted as a lack of discipline, laziness or defiance? Without that education on ADHD that many educators lack the “need” will never be recognized.

### **ADHD, Autism and Advocacy Efforts**

Another interesting dilemma this lack of the recognition of ADHD as a learning impairment has caused is the shocking request for a diagnosis of Autism by parents. Doctors were confused and dismayed by why this was occurring until they realized that an Autism diagnosis opens the doors to additional resources, especially in schools. Of course doctors would not alter a diagnosis however it demonstrates just how desperate parents are becoming. When an early misdiagnosis of Autism is changed to a later diagnosis of ADHD, parents are cautioned about telling the school. Supports will be pulled even though the child’s learning profile remains identical. Yet, the Ontario Ministry and boards, claim that identification as an exceptional learner is not tied to a diagnosis but rather the learning need of a student.

In the past, when meeting with ministries to advocate for the recognition of ADHD under a category and additional training for educators, I have been asked by Ministries why we have not gone down the same path of the parents of children with Autism. When I questioned whether they were talking about law suits, and picketing Queen’s Park everyone paused. But, reality is that parents of children with Autism have been more vocal and the squeaky wheel gets the oil.

I have pondered why this is many times and wonder if it is simply human nature and the way ADHD presents. Children with ADHD can bump along for many years, maybe not working to their potential, but also not being in desperate need. ADHD is an insidious disorder. Symptoms, especially in early childhood can be ambiguous. It can take time, sometimes years, to receive a diagnosis when symptoms are not severe. But over that time, gaps in learning grow and impairments in self-regulation and executive functioning skills become more obvious as we expect more from the child as they grow older. The “crash and burn” can be delayed many years, maybe even

into late adolescence and the entrance into post-secondary education. With a diagnosis of Autism it is different. Parents must act immediately.

### **Where do we go from here?**

Unfortunately misunderstandings, myths and misinformation around ADHD continue. Parents are still judged on their decisions around treatment, parenting, diet, exercise, screen time, disclosure to schools, even the acceptance of a diagnosis and whether ADHD is real. Who wants to put themselves out there to be questioned and judged by people who know very little about ADHD. Everyone seems to have an opinion about ADHD and feels justified in expressing it even when they know nothing about this medical disorder.

It has been extremely difficult to get parents of children with ADHD to speak to the media and talk about their challenges accessing services for their child who is struggling at school. I completely understand why this is. A great deal of stigma still exists around ADHD. Parents do not want to place their child in the spotlight, nor does the child wish to be there. Parents do not want to vocally criticize a school or board in the media when their child has to attend that school every day and possibly face retribution.

But, without media coverage capturing political attention is impossible.

So what is the answer? That we need to become more vocal is a given. Finding those who are willing to do so will be a challenge, but recently more parents expressed an interest in speaking out. Perhaps now is the time to act.

### **My request to you is:**

- If your child has been refused recognition as an exceptional learner and is therefore not receiving special education resources e-mail me your storey. (Ontario, BC, Alberta and Quebec)
- If your child is not receiving the resources they need for their ADHD in the “inclusion” system e-mail me your storey.
- If you have a story about an educator who did not have sufficient knowledge about ADHD and caused your child distress e-mail me your storey.
- If you feel this is an important issue to tackle and would be willing to send a letter or sign a petition, please let me.
- If you would like to be involved in these advocacy efforts, please contact me.

**Please be assured that we will not share this information without your permission.**

For now we would like to gauge your feelings on this issue and quantify the damage caused by school systems not sufficiently recognizing that ADHD causes exceptional learning needs.

Please e-mail me at

