

The “Rapid Response to Barriers to Learning” Working Group of the Learning Partners Advisory Council

Prince Edward Island is increasingly taking data-driven, consultative approaches to public policy development¹; no more so is this true than in the area of public education² and, more generally, learning. This is laudable: policy decisions based on evidence are *better* decisions, and consulting with citizens about policy is better than making policy decisions in the abstract.

There is a risk, however, that as we become more data-driven and consultative, barriers to learning that affect smaller, isolated groups of learners in the population will never rise to the top of the priority list.

If we focus our gaze exclusively on those matters that surveys and advisory groups tell us are the public’s highest priority, if we expend our energies only on strategies that will have the highest impact on the greatest numbers, then we ignore challenges that, in an inclusive society, where we believe in the power and potential of *every* citizen to learn, demand our attention.

An example:

Learning in all domains is rapidly undergoing a digital transformation. Ubiquitous computing and access to the network is of tremendous utility to advancing learning at all levels.

Except that computers and access to the network are *not* ubiquitous: we don’t know how many Island families lack computers and Internet access – it is common to quote 1% or 10% or 25% or other numbers based on old data or anecdotal reports – and yet we continue to act as though digital tools are in the hands of *everyone*. Our attempts to address this issue through policy are almost non-existent, and when this issue is raised during policy discussions it’s dismissed as something that will “figure itself out.”

Another example:

An estimated 1 in 94 Canadians are on the autism spectrum³. Autism affects learning in myriad ways, and our approach to addressing the needs of learners with autism has primarily focused on supports and interventions to allow them to learn alongside more typical learners in public school. But to date this is an approach that sets its goal only as high as allowing learners with

¹ “We must continuously look for new ways to obtain input from citizens and the community, to inform government decisions and priorities. By listening carefully to citizens, we will make better decisions about public policy and its administration. Further, a properly grounded approach to listening will sustain government on a strategic policy course.” – *The Premier as Public Servant Leader*, Premier Wade MacLauchlan, March 2, 2015.

² “The new [Education] Act requires schools to set focused goals to improve student success, share those goals with their school communities, and principals will be working with the department to achieve these goals.” – *New Education Act comes into effect ahead of beginning of school year* (news release: l.ruk.ca/education-act)

³ Health Canada, <http://l.ruk.ca/autism>

autism to *survive*, rather than seeking to allow them to *thrive*⁴; we have yet to address the opportunities available to us if we look at autism in an integrated, holistic, cross-generational manner.

And yet because autism affects less than 1% of learners, it is rarely considered as part of the larger conversation about learning, and gets flagged as part of different “special needs” or “behavioural issues” dialogues, something that runs at cross-purposes to the kind of overarching, integrated approach it demands.

These are but two of many issues that affect smaller constituencies of Islanders; they are not issues that, beyond the work of brave or frustrated advocates, are raised frequently when we are developing public policy. And yet on an individual and family level, these are concerns that deserve our attention if we are to develop truly equitable learning systems.

This is not to say that there have not been attempts to focus light on these issues.

For example, in 2009 a draft “Autism Action Plan” was released after an extensive collaborative process involving those both inside and outside government, an ad hoc Autism Action Group struck by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The plan, 86 pages long and containing 37 recommendations, reflected a broad, cross-departmental, cross-agency approach to improving the lives of people with autism and their families.

And yet, while some of the plan’s recommendations were acted on, most were not, and the central challenge put forward by the Autism Action Group (AAG) in describing its *own* limitations remains unaddressed:

Fourth, the department-based, or service-based silos are entrenched, and cannot be penetrated by the good will and intent of the AAG participants alone because each department or service applies very different approaches to ASD supports and services. At their levels within their corresponding organizations, the AAG participants did not have the authority or mandate to resolve these issues.

These barriers-to-learning challenges sit at the heart of the issues that the Learning Partners Advisory Council is mandated to address, expressed well in the draft position paper as the first item under *Priorities and Directions for Learning*:

Learning is the key to the best future possible not only for individual Islanders, but for our society as well. Our learning systems must foster the capacity and attitudes to maintain and further develop Prince Edward Island as a caring, just and sustainable society. We must ensure we build a culture of acceptance, inclusion, civic engagement, and belonging. Learning, both formal and informal, should foster within each person a responsibility to care for and support all those within the society, to value diversity, and to contribute to our social fabric.

⁴ Julia Gaudet, Director of Student Service, English Language School Board, 2015, during a conversation about the role of educational assistants supporting learners with autism.

The Autism Action Group, despite being broadly based and with a mandate to provide advice to government on barriers to and opportunities for learning, largely failed in any substantial way to change the course of our approach to autism.

I posit that one reason for this failure, in addition to the “service-based silos” that the group itself pointed out, is that the scope and scale of the plan put forward by the group was so substantial and transformative that it was greeted by a kind of policy-making whiplash: the Action Plan proposed a transformation in the way that the province supports people with autism that was so substantial, so requiring of resources, money and, most challenging, a change in attitude, that it was cherry-picked for easy wins, and then set aside.

This is confounding both for what went unachieved but also, as there has been no return to consider these challenges in the years since, as supports for people with autism have *contracted* rather than expanded.

I propose to take a different tack.

I propose to strike a working group of the Learning Partners Advisory Council, the *Rapid Response to Barriers to Learning Working Group*, that will be specifically tasked with identifying issues such as this – small by the numbers, profound in impact – with an eye to making specific, realistic, actionable practical and policy recommendations that will remove barriers to learning. These issues may be economic, they may involve disability, they may touch on geography, or simply on learning interests that fall outside the margins; what they will share is that they present uncommon barriers to learning that can be reasonably removed or mitigated.

The principles I propose the working group operate under are as follows:

1. **The group will *not* be tasked with making profound policy statements, nor those that would require substantial reengineering of the “silos” of departments and agencies.**

For example, the Autism Action Plan contains a priority recommendation “There should be no unreasonable wait lists for individuals with ASD to access publicly-provided interventions.” This remains a significant concern for people with autism, but to address it would require additional resources, money and planning at the scale that puts this, for all practical purposes, in the realm of the impossible. As such, this type of issue would not be considered.

2. **The group will focus its attentions on a single issue, or theme, at a time, rather than seeking to undertake a broad survey of barriers to learning.**

The goal is to stay focused and to prevent overwhelm-panic and scope-fatigue.

3. **The emphasis of the group will be on identifying actionable practical or policy changes, not theoretical or long-term changes in approach.**

For example, perhaps it may be witnessed that there is no regular communication between the Director of Student Services in Public Schools Branch and their counterparts in the Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture. The working group might, after

consulting both, recommend a framework for more regular communication.

4. **The group will focus primarily on recommendations that do not require substantial expenditure of funds.**

This is not to suggest that there are not barriers to learning that require such expenditure, simply that there are many issues that do not, and these issues can be addressed more quickly because of this.

5. **The group will, as required, expand its membership to include others, inside and outside of government, as it considers different barriers.**

The permanent membership of the working group, however, will consist of Learning Partners Advisory Council members.

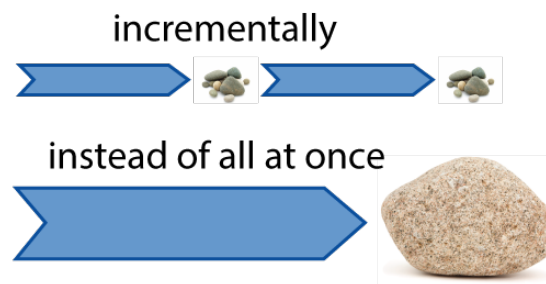
6. **The group will focus, as LPAC generally, on barriers to learning broadly, from cradle to grave, and not only those specific to public schools.**

7. **The group will adopt the “agile” methods of the software development community,**

This is an approach well-described in *Agile in a Nutshell*⁵:

Agile is a time boxed, iterative approach to software delivery that builds software incrementally from the start of the project, instead of trying to deliver it all at once near the end.

This is the heart of the “rapid reaction” in the working group’s title: its time scale will be weeks rather than months or years, and its recommendations will be reasonable, iterative and honouring of existing resources.



In short, the types of recommendations I propose that the working group focus on would not be sweeping – “address the issue of the digital divide” – but rather instead reasonable, achievable, and human in their scope.

⁵ <http://www.agilenutshell.com/>

For example: the Department of Education, Early Learning and Culture maintains a library of resource materials on autism⁶ in the Arsenault Building in Charlottetown. The establishment of the library was one of the recommendations acted upon from the Autism Action Plan:

The Province partner with the Autism Society to establish an Autism Resource Centre that provides accurate information regarding the interventions, programs, services and supports available, as well as providing a lending library of resources and tools to parents and families.

Several years on, however, the very existence of the library is not well-known to the autism community nor, indeed, within the public school educator community. As a result this valuable resource library is rendered much less useful because its breadth and depth is largely unknown to the communities it hoped to serve.

At the same time, and perhaps because the Autism Lending Library is not well-known, the Autism Society itself, as well as other autism organizations like Stars for Life Foundation for Autism, have set out to develop autism resource collections of their own.

The result: disconnected collections of resources, difficult to navigate, and with the efforts to establish and maintain them not rewarded by frequent use.

A practical recommendation from the working group, confronted with this situation, might simply be to recommend that the materials in the Autism Lending Library, already catalogued in the School Library catalogue system, be joined there by the collections maintained by other groups.

There would be no change in the location or borrowing policies for the resources, simply additional catalogue records in a system that already exists. This is an easily implemented recommendation that would take existing resources and make them more valuable: it would enhance the capacity of learners with autism and their families and educators to address autism's challenges and opportunities.

This is the sort of actionable practical recommendation that I would expect to be the product of the working group.

It may appear ironic, in light of my suggestion that what's needed is an "overarching, integrated approach" to confronting our learning challenges, that I propose a working group that is to take a narrow, targeted approach to confronting them. But it has been my experience that in the ferreting out of specific barriers one can often shed more light on the true, more substantial challenges at hand than a more abstract, deliberative approach would.

For example, in my review of the state of the Autism Lending Library I was confounded by how difficult it was to find out anything about the library; no public servant appeared to be responsible for it. I found out, indeed, that this is because no public servant *is* responsible for it. And, indeed, there are no staff in the Department of Education, Early Learning, and Culture with specific responsibility for autism after the reorganizations of the past year. And so my survey of

⁶ "If additional materials are required, the parent is encouraged to borrow materials from the Autism Lending Library." in *Prince Edward Island Autism Funding Guidelines* (<http://l.ruk.ca/guidelines>) appears to be the only mention of this library online.

a particular challenge also, by side effect, taught me a lot about how the reorganization happened, and where autism challenges are being addressed in the public service now.

In other words, often you can learn a lot about the mountain if you set out to climb to the top of it.

I expect the knowledge gained from climbing “Mount Barriers to Education” together would, in addition to whatever practical, immediate fruit is born, also serve to expose members of the working group to targeted doses of learning system realities in the province, and this exposure would result in more knowledgeable members ready to tackle the larger work of taking overarching, integrated approaches that more substantial change demands.

Furthermore, because, as in my example above, one result from a proposed change might involve government and community partners working more closely together on a shared issue, the building blocks for more substantial collaboration would be set in place.

If you climb a mountain together with other people, you’re likely as not to go for coffee with them once the climb is over.

The mandate of the Learning Partners Advisory Council is to “help shape a culture of learning on PEI to advance the prosperity and quality of life of **all Islanders**”⁷ (emphasis mine).

It is important that as much as the council concerns itself with the broad strokes of “shaping a culture,” it also seeks to identify parts of that culture that are particularly challenged – or that offer particular opportunities – but that go unexamined because, in a sea of hands going up for attention, they’re not seen.

The cross-jurisdictional nature of the Learning Partners Advisory Council is particularly well-suited to this work, as much of this unexplored terrain remains unexplored because it touches “a little bit on a lot of things,” and thus, bureaucratically speaking, is “nobody’s department.”

I believe there’s an opportunity here to remove significant barriers to learning, quickly and without fanfare, by taking a deliberate, reasonable approach with a wide-ranging, open-minded set of eyes, and I would be proud to contribute to such an effort.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Rukavina
October 2016

⁷ From the introduction to the Learning Partners Advisory Council, <http://l.ruk.ca/lpac>