

2010

CONNECTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Lessons Learned and Effective Practices Regarding the Implementation of the *Connections for Students* Model to Support Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

**Collaborative Services Delivery Model (CSDM) for
Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Phase 2 Report
of
THE PROVINCIAL ADVISORY TEAM (PAT)**

1 Introduction

Beginning in 2007, the Provincial Advisory Team (PAT) was established to support the monitoring and implementation of the Collaborative Service Delivery Model for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (CSDM-ASD) and to provide advice and oversight to the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Child and Youth Services, as well as the school board/Autism Intervention Program (AIP) partnerships participating in the various phases of CSDM-ASD.

As the PAT, we represent a broad range of stakeholders and interests including Autism Ontario (AO), the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO), parents of students with ASD, school boards, ASD and child professionals, and community agencies. As co-chairs, appointed by the Ministries of Education and Child and Youth Services, we were tasked with leading and facilitating discussions during PAT meetings and consultations.

In our respective roles, PAT members have extensive experience with both the provision of Intensive Behaviour Intervention (IBI) and the publicly-funded school system. Moreover, we are also invested with the senior administrative background to be able to assess the systemic impact on organizations arising from any change proposals. We are pleased to note that during the relatively brief history of the *Connections for Students* model, anecdotal and formal data collection suggests that this collaborative approach to transition planning results in a more orderly, beneficial, and supportive experience for many students with ASD and their families.

Through collaboration among the school boards and Autism Intervention Program (AIP) providers that participated in the CSDM Phase 2, and the Ministries of Education and Children and Youth Services, we have identified effective practices that may be helpful in the ongoing implementation of the *Connections for Students* model. In the pages that follow, school board and AIP staff will be able to access lessons learned and suggested strategies that were informed by our observation and participation as representatives of PAT.

Provincial Implementation of the Collaborative Service Delivery Model for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (*Connections for Students*) marks a significant improvement in the provision of services to students with autism spectrum disorders, and we are thankful for the opportunity to contribute to this improvement. It is now the responsibility of AIP providers and school boards to maintain and improve upon established partnerships with families to refine supports for children and youth with ASD making transitions of all kinds. The barometer for the health of these partnerships will continue to be the extent to which collaboration impacts the transformation of these institutions.

Respectfully,

The Provincial Advisory Team

Gary Mahoney, and Elizabeth Scott, Co-chairs

2 Characteristics of Success and Suggested Strategies

The *Characteristics of Success and Suggested Strategies* include effective practices identified by the Provincial Advisory Team (PAT) during their observation and participation in the Collaborative Service Delivery Model (CSDM) for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Phase 2. Effective practices were informed by experiences and lessons learned summarized by the 16 school board and AIP partnerships that implemented the *Connections for Students* model during CSDM Phase 2.

These lessons learned and suggested strategies may be helpful to school boards and AIP providers in the ongoing implementation of *Connections for Students*. These strategies may not reflect the realities of all projects, nor do they attempt to set out definitive practices. It is understood that each partnership has their own unique circumstances; therefore effective practices provided may be adapted to best suit the needs of the school boards, AIP, the student, and their families.

Communication

- Consistent communication policies, procedures, and roles and responsibilities are vital for successful implementation of *Connections for Students*.
- Open and honest communication needs to occur on a regular basis and be planned for.
- Communication in each instance is essential so that both partners are aware of the situation and can arrange for support as quickly as possible.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Communication Strategies

Regular Meetings

- Ensure that meetings occur on a regular basis and are goal oriented and collaborative.
- Attempt to schedule all transition team meetings during the first meeting of the transition team.

Meeting Minutes

- Include meeting minutes as a regular practice during transition team meetings.
- Meeting minutes can engage all members of the transition team and provide opportunities to plan effectively for the student.
- Make copies of minutes available to all members of the transition team in a timely fashion after each meeting.
- Minutes can be reviewed at the beginning of the next meeting to determine actions taken and results achieved.

Common Language

- Transition team members have the common goal of making the child's strengths and needs the primary focus of discussions and planning. To facilitate this process, it is helpful to use language that is understood by all parties.

- Develop capacity of school board and AIP staff in the understanding and use of assessment tools which guide the program focus for the student, and ensure that parents receive consistent messaging from AIP providers and school board staff involved in the transition process for their child.

Planning

- Planning for capacity building, training and learning must be systemic and focused and incorporate resources that are readily available.
- Ensure there are clear goals, directions, and consensus on what is needed.
- Planning ahead during monthly meetings is necessary to ensure the child's needs are met.
- Ensure understanding of all team roles and responsibilities as they shift through the *Connections for Students* process.
- Plan ahead during monthly meetings with the end in mind and appoint a *Connections for Students* lead position to coordinate activities between AIP provider, school board and school teams.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Planning Strategies

Transition Protocol

- Develop a protocol that can be shared with all participants.
- A well-developed protocol will outline the process and provide clear information and supports to AIP providers and school board staff regarding transition to school for students receiving Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy.
- The protocol should also be shared with parents, principals, and other school board staff, to ensure everyone has the same information and expectations.
- Protocols should be concise and reader friendly so that they can be used by parents, service providers, and school boards. Avoid the use of technical language and acronyms.
- Set aside time early on to review protocols, practices and procedures when implementing *Connections for Students*.
- Revise and update protocols as required.

Support Packages

- Ensure that all system principals and school teams have a support package that provides everything they need for implementation so their energies are not spent on organizing, finding process information, forms, etc.
- Templates required for the process should be readily accessible for all members of the transition team.

Student Centred Teams

- Transition team members have a responsibility to make each child's strengths and needs the primary focus of the discussions and planning.
- Ensure a commitment by participants in the transition process to keep the child's strengths and needs at the centre of all discussions.
- Listen to the needs of the participants and develop an individual transition plan that is appropriate for all involved.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Student Centred Strategies

Defined Roles & Responsibilities

- Clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations for all team members.
- Clearly defined roles establish a foundation for efficient and effective working relationships and support collaborative and complimentary functioning of transition teams. As transition teams expand or shift their focus, it would be helpful to identify team members, primary responsibilities, any shared responsibilities (e.g. reports on student's IBI progress; communications liaison; records minutes and distributes).
- Include outline of roles and responsibilities in transition protocols, ensuring that they are available to all members of the transition team.

Flexibility

- Every situation is different and has its own factors to be considered, reinforcing the need for clear and immediate communication between AIP providers and school boards.
- The activities of the transition team should be guided by the child's individual transition experience, and their strengths and needs.
- Protocols should be written and implemented in a way that is flexible rather than prescriptive.
- It is important to recognize different learning styles and comfort levels within a team environment.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Flexibility Strategies

Establish Needs

- Identify strengths and needs of the child transitioning, and the role of the transition team from the beginning.

Evolving Guidelines

- It may be beneficial to have a specific *Connections for Students* format and/or structure that can initially be shared with the family.
- Ensure that team members are aware that transition experiences may vary, and include the flexibility to individualize any *Connections for Students* format, structure, and/or process.

Parent Communication

- Provide materials to support parents in the *Connections for Students* process. Knowledge and information will ensure a more seamless transition. Include parents in goal and priority setting.
- Make an individual available to parents with whom they can comfortably speak with between meetings, when issues arise.
- A variety of communication methods, readily available and easily accessible may address individual needs and learning styles.

Creative Scheduling

- Look at creative ways to cover classrooms for teachers, and provide alternative means for participation in meetings for families when meetings occur during the day.

3 Approaches to Effective Collaboration

The Provincial Advisory Team (PAT) has identified the following Considerations that may require particular focus by school boards and partnerships implementing the *Connections for Students* model. Each consideration categorizes a summary of experiences that occurred during the implementation of the Collaborative Service Delivery Model (CSDM) for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Phase 2, and include potential recommended solutions provided by the PAT that may be helpful to school boards and AIP providers in the ongoing implementation of *Connections for Students*.

It is understood that each partnership has their own unique circumstances; therefore considerations identified are not a definitive list that school board and AIP partnerships may encounter during the provincial implementation of *Connections for Students*, nor do they reflect the realities of all partnership conditions. This provides an opportunity for the sharing of effective practices and approaches which PAT members have found to be useful when planning and implementing the *Connections for Students* model.

People & Organizational Management

Regular meetings can present a challenge for professionals and parents. Limited capacity of staff to attend transition meetings due to time commitments and human resources, as well as parents' limitations to attend meetings due to work, transportation or personal circumstances (financial, time and/or child care challenges) may result in scheduling difficulties.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- Creatively schedule meetings and ask all team members for availability and preferences from the beginning. Guide administrators to set aside a half day or more for transition team meetings so all staff can be involved. Explore ability to provide release time/coverage as required.
- Pre-Schedule all transition team meetings at the earliest possible date, to allow parents and transition team members to plan and make arrangements well in advance of any upcoming meetings.
- Schedule transition team meetings at the best location possible, agreed upon by all transition team members, which can be easily accessible by all individuals attending. The school may not always be the best location in every circumstance.
- Select the appropriate lead person for the transition team that will have the ability to attend and lead discussion at each meeting. The lead person will be capable of effectively communicating with each member of the transition team, including the parent(s)/guardian(s) or family representative.

- With parental consent, meetings may proceed in alternate formats. Offer parents the option of a teleconference, provide minutes after all meetings or provide an option that allows parents to send an alternate family representative to the meeting. Properly document the family representative is attending on the parent's behalf (Be consistent with family representative as much as possible).
- Meetings may also be aligned or combined with other meetings, such as an IPRC meeting, focused on the same child. This will reduce any likelihood of transition team members and/or parents to be overwhelmed by meetings.
- Make meetings more effective by: assigning preparation work to the appropriate individual team members as required, establishing the purpose of the meeting and/or agenda in consultation with all participants and ensuring that all participants have all the necessary information to engage in informed discussion and, establishing meeting or facilitation norms.

Roles and Responsibilities

Parents and school staff may have difficulty understanding the role and responsibilities of each transition team member as they shift into the *Connections for Students* process. Parents and team members may be entering new, changed or enhanced roles and required clarity about how these roles support and compliment each other.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- Provide role descriptions to transition team members. Take the time to check in periodically with team members to ensure they fully understand the information discussed at meetings, their role and any responsibilities.
- Provide parent(s)/guardian(s) with a support materials package, identifying each member on the team, a description of their role, and the scope of their participation as a member of the transition team.
- Include in the meeting minutes a detailed description of decisions made and actions required, including any relevant responsibilities, and who those responsibilities are attributed to, associated with such decisions or action items. Follow up with the team members responsible at subsequent meetings.
- Provide regular updates to board administration the *Connections for Students* process in order to support school staff, administration, if/when they are required to participate as part of a student transition team.

Decision Making

Connections for Students team members may not agree on an area of importance for the student or on communication, format, or a particular decision to be made.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- Coming to consensus on what the focus should be takes time and insightful probing from team members. A focus on the needs of the child will result in the development of organic solutions.

- An agreed upon assessment tool can be effective in guiding student transition and identify a focus and inform the development of a student's transition process.
- Autism Intervention Program (AIP) providers and District School Boards (DSBs) should clearly define what their respective roles in the transition process are, and what decisions regarding students they are responsible for (i.e. eligibility for discharge, classroom placement etc.)
- AIPs and DSBs should be in regular contact and meet prior to the first meeting with the student's parent(s)/guardian(s) to ensure that all team members are clear on what their role in the transition process includes.
- Empower the parent(s)/guardian(s) before each meeting, by providing the necessary information and tools to understand and provide input into each decision.

Geography

Some board districts may cover a vast geographical area, therefore children receiving IBI and entering *Connections for Students* may be spread out and schools may not go through the *Connections for Students* process for the first time well into the next few years. The challenge is to have school staff well-trained and skilled to successfully transition students through the *Connections* process even though it may be years between cases.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- Learning opportunities for principals, and school staff, including training will provide general knowledge of *Connections for Students*. A detailed toolkit or guide provided to transition team members upon identification of a student entering the *Connections for Students* process may provide appropriate resources when needed.
- Develop Professional Learning Communities with other local school boards to learn from other examples or networks that are already established. These groups can provide supports and increase awareness of potential issues for partnerships when a child with ASD begins their *Connections for Students* experience.
- Develop a local school board champion that can be shared regionally providing training and awareness on an as needed basis. A local champion will ensure that knowledge is retained and can be shared with applicable staff when a student participates in the *Connections for Students* process.
- Ensure that your schools and school boards are compliant with *Policy Program Memorandum (PPM) 140: Incorporating Methods of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) into Programs with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)*. Compliance will ensure that ABA instructional methods will be accessible by all appropriate school staff and will be included in the instructional repertoire of any relevant educators.

Training and Learning

Ensuring adequate knowledge of ASD among team members involved with the student is critical. Although in-service and training may have taken place in your board, if individual staff have not had a student with ASD, they may have limited knowledge of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and how it can be applied and tailored to meet the varying strengths and needs of the student. General

information regarding principles of ABA is widespread, but specific strategies may not be in everyone's repertoire.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- Ensure learning opportunities are made available to all personnel involved in supporting the student with ASD. Identifying resources that are most helpful for transition team members, making such resources available, and planning training around provided resources will result in effective learning and implementation of practices by participants.
- Board level professionals with ABA expertise can provide hands-on support to classroom teachers and school board staff to assist putting strategies in place for students with ASD. Including ABA information in any toolkit or guide for staff, and continuing access to training and supports will better equip team members to support the *Connections for Students* process.
- Include tiered training to all school board staff, providing beginner, intermediate, and advanced level training, as appropriate, for all educational and administrative staff.

Early Withdrawal from IBI

There may be a few situations in which sudden withdrawals from IBI therapy occur, resulting in less than six months for transition. Boards may experience sudden parental withdrawals from IBI or abrupt clinical-based discharges.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- The creation of an abbreviated timeline can be included in toolkit(s)/guide(s). Identify the prioritized steps that must be in place in a shorter time frame to assist with transitions in these circumstances. An additional abbreviated timeline identifies the necessary steps for any transition that serves as a guideline to follow and ensure as seamless a transition as possible for students, albeit in a shorter than optimal timeline.

Parent Engagement

Parents/Guardians and/or family representatives participating in the *Connections for Students* may limit their level of input into the transition process or become disengaged during transition team meetings. This may be due to unfamiliarity with school boards and AIP processes or a lack of supports to provide an opportunity for the family to effectively contribute to the planning and progress of the *Connections for Students* transition.

Provincial Advisory Team Recommended Solutions

- Parent and family preparation is an essential component of the *Connections for Students* process. Participation can be stressful and an emotional experience for parents and family members. Recognizing, encouraging and supporting family engagement will support the development of patience, knowledge, confidence and perseverance. Develop and share parent brochures that describe the *Connections for Students* model and recognize the important role families have in contributing to their child's transition.

- Identify strategies to remove barriers to parent engagement (i.e. communication and language), and provide support to parents to acquire skills and knowledge that they require to be engaged and involved in their child's learning.
- Ensure an understanding of all families needs and make available appropriate supports such as social workers, translators or parent advocates as required. Third party supports may be helpful for families and may be required to accompany parent(s)/guardian(s) to meetings to help families express their ideas. These supports can help improve communication between parent(s) and other transition team members and prevent or limit the scope of potential misunderstandings.
- Provide regular updates to school board Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs) on the *Connections for Students* process and work with SEACs to provide any additional supports that may be required by parent(s)/guardian(s) and families of students with ASD.