

ACCESS TO COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

An Evaluation on the Role of ACEE

**Prepared for
Independent Living Resource Centre**



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TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACEE means Access to Community Education and Employment, the name of the program addressing the needs of young adults with disabilities, often referred to as the Program.

Advisory Committee is the structure that provides advice to the ACEE program. It is made up of the partners that support the ACEE program.

Affirmative Industries is a non profit society that supports the mental health community with supported employment within businesses in which they own and operate

Board refers to the board of directors, the governing body for the Independent Living Resource Center.

Funders refers to the Department of Education and Department of Community Services who are the two departments of government, co-funding ACEE.

HACL refers to the Halifax Association for Community Living.

IL The philosophy of Independent Living means that programs are governed and controlled by persons with disabilities; program resources are responsive to all types of disabilities; consumers of the ILRC decide what needs have to be addressed and the best approaches to deal with barriers in the community; and everyone has the right to participate in the social, political, economic, academic and cultural life of his or her community.

ILRC is the Independent Living Resource Center, the organization which has responsibility for the ACEE program.

Participants refers to individuals while in the ACEE program.

Students refers to individuals while in the public school program.

Team Work Cooperative is a non-profit organization devoted to assisting persons with disabilities become employed within the Nova Scotia labour force.

Work Bridge is a job development agency for persons with disabilities seeking employment or enhanced employment opportunities in the Halifax Regional Municipality. The agency works with persons with disabilities who are job ready to assist them in achieving full access to the labour market.

Young Adults with Disabilities refers to the individuals within the ACEE program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1996 the Department of Education for the Province of Nova Scotia introduced a Special Education Policy. The policy provided special-needs students the opportunity to be educated within their community and integrated into the classrooms of the local schools. The implementation of this policy set in motion a process that would assist society in making a shift in its thinking towards individuals with disabilities. The expectation was there would be something for the students to transition to from high school. Many became concerned when it became evident programs needed to be developed.

Over the past two years the Independent Living Resource Center (ILRC) has been offering the Access to Community Education and Employment (ACEE) Program to address the identified need. This Program provides young adults with disabilities an opportunity to complement and enhance their skills after leaving the public schools. These enhanced skills provide them with an opportunity to gain employment and/or other opportunities within the broader community. The purpose of the evaluation is to address the following question:

What is the role of the Program in assisting young adults with disabilities in their transitioning to the broader community?

To assist in addressing this question multiple data collection methods were used. They included reading of documents, conducting one on one interviews in person and by telephone, and small group discussions. In all cases prepared questions were used to guide the discussion.

The findings have shown that the ACEE Program is providing young adults with disabilities a valuable option after leaving the public school system. The philosophy of the Program is based upon the principles of Independent Living, involving partnerships and being community based. The organizations and individuals involved in the operation and partnership of the Program are committed to the success of the program. The pooling of resources and the collaborative work has provided the foundation for the success of ACEE. The findings have also indicated that the role and involvement of parents and the business community provide challenges and opportunities for the ACEE program.

Building upon the strengths of the past two years, the recommendations provide a direction for the role of ACEE as a program and for the partners that have contributed to its success to continue their involvement.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Report

This report presents an assessment of the role of the Access to Community Employment and Education Program (ACEE) (the Program), focusing on the contribution the Program makes to transitioning from high school to roles in the community. A description of the evaluation project is found in Appendix A. This report is prepared for the Board of the Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC). It presents a brief background to the need for transition programs. It then describes the work of ACEE. The report describes the methodology used for the assessment. A summary of the information collected is presented by the groups from which data were gathered. The information was analyzed and is presented by the themes that emerged and issues that should be of interest to decision makers. The report includes recommendations that require further discussion and in some cases require an action plan.

Background/Context

In 1996 the Department of Education for the Province of Nova Scotia introduced a Special Education Policy. The framework of the policy provides students with special needs an opportunity to be educated within their communities and integrated into the classrooms of the school, and outlines the direction for learning.

The policy also addresses the issue of transition not only from one level of schooling to another but also from the school system to the community. This is outlined in the following procedures from the Special Education Policy.¹

School – to – community transition planning should begin when a student enters junior high school.

School – to – community transition planning should address any area necessary for students to participate in education, employment, housing, friendships, recreation, medical services, transportation, community activities, and financial management.

It was felt this policy set in motion a process that would result in society making a shift in its thinking towards individuals with disabilities. The expectation was there would be something for the students to transition to from high school. Many people became concerned when it became evident programs needed to be developed.

To determine the need, a survey was conducted by the Department of Education across the province. The results showed the highest need was in the Halifax Regional School Board area with the next highest area of need in the Port Hawkesbury area. With this information in hand, the development of a program to serve the Halifax area proceeded. It was felt from the outset that it would be community based. It became evident that to implement a transition program would require a collaborative approach because the ownership of the response to the need went beyond the mandates of any one department. In addition the topics and expertise to be addressed did not reside in any one organization. It was also felt that the expertise of a community-based organization would provide the type of base on which to build the foundation needed for a transition program.

¹ Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, *Special Education Policy Manual*, October, 1997 (amended).

Overlapping the efforts of the Department of Education was the work being carried out in the community by ILRC. From 2000 to 2004, the ILRC successfully delivered *The Next Step* project, a program of employability enhancement for persons with disabilities at the beginning of their path to independence and employment. The ILRC delivered the project in partnership with two other non-profit disability organizations, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and Affirmative Industries (AI). Each organization offered a component of the project: the ILRC offered Independent Living workshops; CMHA offered Asset Mapping or Career Exploration workshops and AI offered Employment Orientation workshops and workplace training at Petstuff on the Go business.

The Federal Government funded *The Next Step* for the four years the project was offered. Since 2001, *The Next Step* saw an increase of youth with disabilities participating in the program. In its final year, 80% of *Next Step* participants were youth with disabilities. The Federal Government did not renew funding after the spring of 2004 due to a shift in Service Canada's funding criteria.

In the fall of 2002, local partners began meeting to develop a post-high school options initiative for students with disabilities at risk of not making a successful transition from high school to community. The partners included representatives from the Department of Education, Halifax Regional School Board, Nova Scotia Community College, TEAM Work Co-operative, and The Work Bridge. In 2004, the Post-high School Options Committee invited disability organizations to a community meeting, where they presented an overview of their vision of a transition program and invited interested organizations to submit proposals outlining their potential contribution. The ILRC submitted a proposal and was identified as the appropriate community-based partner, given its successful delivery of *The Next Step* project and collaborative partnership with two other disability organizations.

The ILRC, now partnering with the Post-high School Options Committee, took the lead to secure funding for the ACEE program. Service Canada was invited to the table to discuss funding options, and in the fall of 2004, the ILRC secured pre-operational funds from Service Canada to research the need for a transition program for youth with disabilities.

Service Canada funded the first year of ACEE in 2005-2006. Funding for the Program for 2006 – 2007 is from the Department of Education and the Department of Community Services.

Description of ACEE

The ILRC mission states, "We support persons with disabilities to make informed choices about how they want to live their lives. We provide this support through programs and services that promote independent living." ACEE is offered by the Independent Living Resource Centre (ILRC) and is guided by the principles of independent living which are: the Centre and programs are governed and controlled by persons with disabilities; program resources are responsive to all types of disabilities; consumers of the ILRC decide what needs have to be addressed and the best approaches to deal with barriers in the community; and everyone has the right to participate in the social, political, economic, academic and cultural life of the community.

ACEE supports young adults with disabilities to make an effective transition from high school to further education or work in the community by gaining knowledge, skills, and exposure to learning and work experiences. The program logic model is depicted in Appendix B.

ACEE youth participate in workshops that cover topics on independent living skills, career exploration, employment orientation and job-related literacy and numeracy skills. In addition to attending workshops, ACEE youth job shadow at Affirmative Industries two community businesses, the Neighbourhood Dollar Plus Store and Petstuff on the Go. While job shadowing, youth are assessed on their work skills and regularly receive feedback on their progress. The youth develop employment or educational plans outlining specific benchmarks that will take them to community employment or further education. The profile of students and their accomplishments for the first two years of ACEE is presented in Appendix C.

Once youth have developed the skills and are ready to move into a community work placement, the ACEE job developer scouts potential placements and job opportunities. When a placement has been secured, an ACEE program facilitator or Affirmative Industries job coach provides job coaching support. Once the youth, employer, and job coach are satisfied the youth can fulfill the job requirements, the job coach fades but continues to be available to troubleshoot potential problems. A youth who is interested in going on to further education or training would job shadow in a placement related to the educational program and continue attending ACEE workshops until the educational program begins.

ACEE youth will have been successful once they have moved into a post-secondary educational program or have secured and maintained competitive employment.

METHODOLOGY

ILRC invited Chaytor Consulting (the evaluators) to conduct an evaluation of the ACEE Program. The evaluators met with the executive director of ILRC and the project coordinator of ACEE to learn of priorities for the evaluation. It was decided to focus the evaluation on the role of ACEE and the contribution the Program makes to youth with disabilities. The evaluators prepared an evaluation plan and met with representatives of the program (key informants) to review the plan and seek their suggestions for the evaluation. This section briefly describes the methodology used for the ACEE evaluation.

Data Collection

Document Review

Documents pertaining to the existing Program, as well as reports on student progress were reviewed to further understand the Program.

Key Informant Discussion

To advise on an approach to the evaluation, the evaluators met with key informants who had insight into the Program. Key informants were identified and contacted by ILRC. The discussion guide is attached (Appendix D).

Interviews

A description of the evaluation project and semi-structured interview and discussion guides (Appendix E) were created based on the defined need. A sample of employers, members of the Advisory Committee and representatives of the Departments of Education and Community Services were interviewed. Each person interviewed received a copy of the interview guide and evaluation overview for their review in advance of the interview. All interviews were audio-taped. The purpose of taping the interviews was for the benefit of the interviewer to later review the conversation for data write-up, coding and analysis. At the beginning of each interview, each participant was reminded of the focus of the evaluation and the process for conducting the interview, and was given an opportunity to ask questions before the interview started.

The following table illustrates the breakdown by category and data collection method:

Category	Discussion Group	Interview	Total
Key Informants	6		6
ILRC Board Meeting	8		8
Program Participants	14		14
Program Facilitators	5		5
Parents of Participants	6	3	9
Advisory Committee		7	7
Employers		4	4
Funders		2	2
Totals	39	16	55

Discussion Groups

To maximize the number of people who could be reached, it was decided to hold discussion sessions with groups who were involved with the Program. Discussion sessions were held with a number of the participants in the Program, with parents of participants, with the facilitators of the Program, and with the Board of ILRC.

Findings

The findings are presented strictly as a summary of the evidence collected. They are, to the fullest extent possible, removed of analysis by the evaluators. The findings demonstrate the concerns and comments made by participants, through the interviews and discussion groups. Findings are presented by the groups contributing and by broad questions posed. Quotations from the findings, presented in italics, represent themes supported by a majority of respondents and are a valid representation of a matter. These are taken mainly from the taped interviews. When discussion groups were used to gather information, there is less detail, fewer direct quotes and more use of the lists of concerns.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected was analyzed through content analysis to assess views regarding the role of ACEE. Findings from all data sources were brought to the discussion. Triangulation was employed and provided a means of testing one source of information against other sources and thereby enhancing the credibility of the information. The goal is to treat evidence fairly and to conduct meaningful analysis of the data.

Discussion and Recommendations

The objective of the discussion is to relate the findings to decision makers in a meaningful way. This is done through the themes that represent all of the findings leading to recommendations that will contribute to the enhancement of ACEE and similar programs.

Confidentiality and Security of Information

Information gathered during this evaluation may contain personal information as defined by *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Acts*. Those interviewed were told why information was gathered and how information would be used. It is important that all participants and all audiences understand that information can be used only for the purpose for which it was gathered.

FINDINGS

Information was gathered from several groups who have involvement in ACEE. In all cases interview or discussion guides were used. The summary of the findings is presented here as the perspective of the group reporting. This represents the assumptions and understandings of the many groups involved. As noted in the methodology, the different methods of data collection resulted in different levels of detail for the questions posed. A summary and analysis of the findings is presented in the Discussion section of the report.

Perspectives of the Board of ILRC

A brief discussion was held with Members of the Board of ILRC prior to their regular board meeting in May. Board members were given the questions for discussion and an explanation of the evaluation prior to the meeting.

Board members were asked, what message about the Program, from a Board perspective, they want included in the evaluation report. They noted the following:

- It is important to note the results are multifaceted. While some or many get jobs, they learn a number of other skills as well. Learning to use the bus system is one example of an employability skill. The longer-term help the young adults with disabilities receive may be a more significant outcome. The count of jobs as an indicator can be flawed. The job developer works hard to get participants jobs related to their areas of interest.
- The uniqueness of the Program must be noted. As well, the appropriateness of the Program for the help it gives in transitioning is important. ACEE was seen as fine-tuned and highly appropriate.
- The Program fills a gap – especially providing a program for those ages 18 to 21.
- It is necessary to assess the Program by looking at the movement along the continuum of life skills. Measures of success must assess change.
- The philosophy of the Program should be stressed. It adheres to a sound Independent Living philosophy.
- The Program is a skills-based program, focused on life and employability skills.
- The staff in the Program is exceptional. They work hard and are very committed to the Program.
- The partnerships are to be noted. The working together of departments and agencies has been among the best partnerships many board members have seen.

Board members were asked about challenges and benefits to ILRC in their involvement with ACEE. It was noted there have been funding challenges. There were questions about the continuation and sustainability of the program. ILRC does not have a sufficient core funds to deliver the Program.

Board members feel the Program is clearly addressing an unmet need. There have been benefits to the partnership and the Program has given increased profile to ILRC. As well, the

success of this program has created best practices for other areas to look at for possible adoption of this model of a program for transitioning.

When funded by a federal department, the outcomes were defined by that department and resulted in constraints on the Program. It was pointed out that provincial funding means that the Program is better linked to the needs of the participants. The mandate of the Program supports the mandates of the Department of Community Services and the Department of Education.

All members of the Board feel the provincial departments coalesced on this issue. They really joined forces in taking ownership of the problem (need) and supporting a solution. It was convenient that ILRC had a solution (a Program) available to meet the need identified. They were not lobbying without a strategy. Had ILRC not had a program option, the alternative probably would have been that the school board let people go back to public school – even though they were in receipt of a diploma.

Board members were asked if they had any additional points, beyond the discussion questions, to add. They noted the following additional points:

- There is a general gap in transitioning young people to adult programs and services. In health care, for instance, it is not an easy transition from pediatric care to adult care. There is a need to work to bridge this gap.
- Disability should not be medicalized, The Provincial Department of Health Promotion and Protection should see this as a wellness program.
- The Program serves as a bit of an ambassador for the need for transitioning in the population. It helps with the message of inclusion, an example being the presentation by ACEE at the “Architects for Social Justice: Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human rights” conference in early May.
- Provision of this transition service may be a human rights issue.

The Funders

Key representatives of the Departments of Education and Community Services were interviewed. They were given the questions for discussion and an explanation of the evaluation prior to the interview.

The Department of Education introduced a new Special Education Policy in 1996 that provided students an opportunity to be educated within their community and integrated in to the classrooms of their local schools. The funders indicated moving in this direction they knew would require society to make adjustments as well. For Departments of government the new policy created new challenges for existing mandates.

Upon implementing the Special Education Policy, which emphasized transitioning from school to the community, the question arose “transitioning to what?” This issue had been facing the department for several years. Before moving forward, a survey was conducted across the province to determine the need. It was determined that the Halifax area had the highest need followed by the Port Hawkesbury area.

Funders stressed that the first year of operation demonstrated that ACEE was a good program and served the population well. It also demonstrated what the potential of partnering could provide. Initially the program was federally funded. The second year of

funding came from the Departments of Education and Community Services, who wanted to ensure the program continued.

Funders learned, in discussion with parents regarding the type of program to be developed post high school, that sheltered workshops were not always an option for young adults with disabilities. Parents also expressed the desire to have something that was community based with resources linked to the business community. The issue of developing such a program required long-term funding which was not in place. In addition it was felt the program would have greater success if it were located within the community apart from the public school system. The program would offer a number of skills and would complement what the public education system provided, thereby assisting the participants in gaining employment.

It was felt a program such as ACEE is one of many programs that provide options to the population being addressed. The funder indicated the challenge is securing long-term funding at this early stage in the program development. It was noted that the concept of transitioning is one of an ongoing process and should be happening not just from high school to the broader community but throughout the life of a student while in school. With this in mind it was suggested that ACEE should consider an ACEE summer program for students who are in grades 10 and 11 and provide this as another form of transition.

Funders also noted the importance of the good working relationship between departments on matters pertaining to ACEE. It was viewed as a partnership that truly made a contribution to the need of the participants.

The Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee is made up of six members all of whom are stakeholders in ACEE. All members of the Advisory Committee were interviewed. They were sent the interview questions in advance, and a time to conduct the interview was arranged. The interviews were audio taped and used to compile the notes.

The Role of the Advisory Committee

Committee members were first asked to explain the role of the Advisory Committee. All members expressed a commitment to the Program and to their roles on the Advisory Committee. They described the work of the committee as a coming together of the partners. The partners came together over a need that was apparent to several organizations, especially the Nova Scotia Community College and the Department of Education. The role of the Advisory Committee can be presented in terms of the need, the work of the committee in responding to the need, and the importance of the partnership.

The need for a program such as ACEE was stressed. Students who completed their time in school were trying to access the existing options and were being told to come back a year later, because they were not yet ready. The students needed ongoing support. Parents found students' skills deteriorating. The question became, how could these students be supported. Those who recognized the need for a program that would provide support sought funding. The Independent Living Resource Centre was asked to submit a proposal for funding and manage the Program. The Advisory Committee started as a committee of partners.

Members were consistent in their description of their work and role. They defined their role as advocates for the Program, helping with access to the program and looking to expand it as needed. They saw themselves as providing guidance and advice for both the Program and staff and keeping external stakeholders connected with the Program. The committee discussed issues that pertained both to the Program as well as issues of where to go next. It was noted that while the Advisory Committee was task oriented, it really worked at a higher

level than a committee. It was not a steering committee or a management committee. It used a policy governance model. Members recognized their advisory role and noted that the board of ILRC and its executive director were the ones who signed the contract and had the ultimate say. It was reported, however, that the Program followed the recommendations of the committee.

The committee was viewed as a representation of partners. The committee wanted to sustain the initial momentum of developing the Program. Many issues, such as location for the Program, involvement of parents, and program-appropriate behaviour were shared and responded to by all partners. The need for the Program seemed to be equally an issue for the Department of Education, and social agencies as well as education providers. Community agencies were seen as having the knowledge and experience on this topic, and it was important to bring in their expertise. Committee members acted on behalf of the Program in their own work places. One example is the school board representative working with school board protocol to help with communication about the program. Two comments that were recorded and could have been the expressions of all committee members include:

We could not have the kind of success we have had without the players we have had sorting out issues.

The beauty of the Program is the partnerships and relationships that have been created.

Advisory Committee Connections

Committee members were asked about their reporting relationships. All members indicated they report to the agencies they represent. They not only reported, but also felt a responsibility to advance the work of ACEE to their agency. All members were very supportive of ACEE so felt strongly about advancing both the Program and its work. In speaking about connecting ACEE with their own agencies, a number of issues were noted.

Members indicated they had not been put in a position of conflict between their agencies and the program. One member remarked:

This is one of the best examples of collaboration and pooling of resources around. It has enabled agencies to maintain community partnerships and listen to people who are living the issues.

Members were pleased they were addressing a need. The *Special Education Act*, which came into effect in 1996, ensured students would have access to education in their community. This was the incentive to make some shifts. We now have a new generation of young people getting a grade twelve certificate with expectations of availing themselves of further education and opportunity. It was stressed there are few education options for this age group.

ACEE was intended for students at risk for not being able to transition to something meaningful in the community. For some students it may mean a day program, for some a supported work environment, or for others, an educational setting. That gap in transitioning is huge. ACEE was seen by many as being able to respond to the gap in transitioning. Member response included:

This is an amazing program. I think it is sound. Proud to be attached to it.

It has worked well. Students are developing the skill sets they need.

Our barriers are not dollars as much as it is connecting and communicating.

Members remarked on the absence of communication and planning in preparation for the transition for these students. A member noted:

We are working on the planning piece – how do we get engaged sooner with the student? We are on the cusp of something good.

The need to connect with students earlier was frequently stressed. The belief is that this program cannot fill the gap if it is only introduced in grade twelve.

Contribution of Advisory Committee

Committee members were asked if they saw their role as making a contribution to the long-term need of young adults with disabilities. The Committee discusses ACEE within a broader context of the need and potential response to the need. They discuss the numerous issues that influence the success of the Program.

The staff of the Program is very good at reporting on the progress of participants and bringing to the attention of the Advisory Committee any issues that arise. It is necessary, for instance, to explore family supports and other learning opportunities that may be available for participants. The waiting lists for some programs are very long. The committee sees its role as forward looking. One member described the challenge in the following way:

As the educational system has evolved to be more inclusive, society has not. Engagement in an adult services centre is an option but funding for adult services centres has not been increased.

The committee also looks at whether the information sessions for parents are successfully getting the message to those in need. The role of parents of those in the Program needs further discussion. It was agreed that there is a need for education of parents. Parents may have to learn to let go and stop making decisions. Parents of children with challenges feel they can never let go. Persons with disabilities are living longer. They have to go through the normal progression of life. It was noted the parent group is not functioning as it ought to, or as it had been in year one. One committee member presented the dilemma in the following way:

IL says the Program should be consumer driven. Parents are in many cases holding the student back. It is all about risk. Parents of students with a disability are more involved in decision making than in the whole population. The role of parents needs to be addressed directly. Very often students cannot make decisions without contacting a parent. How do we get a parent to let go, how does this happen, and how does this happen over the course of the Program?

Transportation to the Program is a major barrier for many students and the committee is asking whether holding the program in other locations is in any way a solution. The Program is now drawing from those areas or families where there is public transportation. The consensus is that additional locations cannot be considered until funding for the Program is secured. The committee often discusses the funding arrangement. They believe the Program cannot make the contribution it could or should without ongoing assurance of funding.

The location for the program is another matter of discussion. Members generally feel that schools should not “be a parking place for an individual”.

The following was expressed:

The reason we cannot send students back to the school until age 21 is that the expertise for programming is not there. There is not an understanding of the program need. The solution is not holding a student until they are 21; the solution is giving good programming in grades ten, eleven and twelve.

The Committee is very supportive of living-skill enhancement as a route to employability skills. We use the term – community engagement – we would like each participant to be as engaged as possible – be that employment, training, education or going to a day program. Life skills acquisition is the first measure in assisting with employability. Growth and development through working is quite amazing.

ACEE is providing a program for a very small number of the students who could potentially benefit. ACEE is being studied as a program that could be implemented in other locations. The discussion has been on the fact that the principles and philosophy of the Program should be maintained and the Advisory Committee has contributed to this discussion.

Advancing Services for Youth with Disabilities

Committee members were asked about the barriers that hamper a continuum of services. Transition from high school to a next phase presents problems for the whole population but particular problems for youth with disabilities were noted and discussed. The barriers were not seen as insurmountable, but they require an organized effort to be overcome.

The barrier reported as the largest barrier was the divided jurisdiction of responsibilities for services. The federal government plays a role in the planning of employment, employment supports, and employment readiness. Within the provincial government there are more divided jurisdictions. The Department of Education can provide programming for people up to age twenty-one, and the Department of Community Services has a role insofar as they provide some support for adults with disabilities. There is not much communication among those jurisdictions and no long-term plan for support for the persons with disabilities. It was noted there is a need to do research on what supports are available for this sector of the population. One member remarked:

The barrier is in getting departments together. People are operating within their silos, which have their own rules. The process to get funding is horrendous.

ACEE relationship with schools is not as strong as it could be. ACEE cannot be presented as a viable option when you cannot be sure of its existence. When funding is year by year – there is nothing worse than saying to a parent – let’s explore this option – and then that option does not exist. Therefore – we do not encourage going into public schools

Another significant barrier was the lack of early planning. It was pointed out that in the UK planning for post-secondary education begins at age fourteen and the equivalent of Community Services sits at this initial planning meeting. The need for schools to develop more education opportunities through community-based employment was noted. As well the need to explore a wider range of post secondary education supports was suggested. Comments about the lack of planning include:

We have the data, we know who is coming.

Government should be coming in with programming for people before they go adrift.

Our students have an expectation that there is something for them beyond high school. Has the system falsely taken them down a certain route?

Employment options were reported as a large barrier. A need to work more with employers in terms of helping them understand the contribution that persons with disabilities can make was noted. Most committee members believe that there is a lot of work to be done in this area. The issue is not just a financial issue. It was suggested that the disability community must learn to connect with other movements such as the local food movement, the environmental emphasis, and so on. As well as working with employers, there is a need to educate the public around the reality of disabilities. Federal departments that have had funding responsibilities have also demonstrated a lack of understanding of disability on several occasions. There is little understanding of cognitive impairment, emotional impairment and no understanding of individual consequences. A suggestion was:

We need to look at policies and practices that create a more diversified work place. There has to be a commitment to a more diversified work place.

While the many departments having responsibility, the lack of planning, especially early planning and the lack of employment opportunities were the barriers reported as most significant, additional barriers were mentioned. They include the following:

- Working with school structures is difficult. Schools, it was noted, are not good at working with community groups.
- Working with parents in their transition to the student's independence can present challenges for the Program. Parents are also confronted with a steep learning curve at this stage in their child's life.
- Many students have multiple disabilities and can be receiving as many as three interventions from different agencies.
- Students can be at very different levels and have very different capacities to learn, so programs must be individualized.
- The location for the Program has raised questions. There was considerable support for the fact it should not be in the public schools. Whether it should be located at the Nova Scotia Community College seemed to be up for debate.

As noted previously, the barriers to further success were presented by all committee members as issues to be discussed and pursued.

Facilitators

The evaluators scheduled a discussion with the facilitators of the ACEE program. A total of five facilitators were present for the discussion that took place in the ACEE offices. The questions for discussion were provided to the facilitators in advance.

Experience with the Program

The facilitators outlined a number of areas or topics on which the ACEE program was focusing. These areas included life skills, independence, accountability in decision-making, and job related skills. The concern was expressed regarding the length of the program and

the desire to have more time with the young adults so the Program objectives would have a greater chance to be accomplished.

It was expressed that the ACEE Program fills a void for a specific group of students with disabilities who have completed high school. Scheduling of job placements can be a challenge for the families due to the demands of the work site regarding being on time and working at different times of the day. The need to find employers who focus on abilities, not disabilities, was mentioned as the challenge when looking for job placements.

The concept of Independent Living as the foundation of the Program was discussed and the frustration of not having it understood and accepted were discussed.

Challenges in Delivering ACEE

It was noted that the success of the ACEE program is based upon the collaboration that has been developed among the many partners as reflected in the Advisory Committee. To sustain the collaboration, however, there is a need at the day-to-day working level to improve upon communications with the public school system, the business community, parents, and the NSCC.

Participants

A member of the evaluation team met with the participants for a discussion in a classroom at the ACEE program site. The participants were provided the questions beforehand and the staff took time to prepare them for the discussion.

Participants were asked what the Program meant to them. The participants indicated that they learned many skills they did not receive while in the school system. Many of the skills, such as using a bus, how to prepare food, how to get along with others, and how to live in an apartment assist them with living in a community. These skills are also complemented by a number of other areas of personal development such as making friends, having fun, and getting along with people.

Regarding the job training aspect they like the idea of having an opportunity to work in a number of business situations, and learning a number of skills that assist them with jobs. They learn the importance of being to work on time; scheduling their time to get to the work place, and speaking up when questions are asked of them. Many of the participants expressed an interest in working full or part time at the completion of the Program.

Participants generally indicated satisfaction and pleasure at being a part of the Program.

Parents' Perspective on ACEE

All parents or caregivers were contacted about the evaluation and asked to participate in a parent discussion group. They were sent an explanation of the evaluation and the discussion questions in advance. Six parents, representing five participants, met for a two-hour discussion. Three parents asked to participate individually through one-on-one interviews. The information from the interviews has been integrated with the information from the discussion group.

Parents were first asked about their involvement with their child's education during the time the child was in the public education program. They reported the following experiences:

- It was difficult and adversarial
- You had to take a child to the level he or she could go
- Education seemed more geared towards the needs of teachers and the system (rather than the child)
- There was no continuity with resource staff

- It was constantly a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing
- The administration was more the problem rather than teachers
- Those who work in the school system appear very uncomfortable outside of schools
- The idea of transition was not discussed
- Schools reported legal problems with job placement and because of that were unable to pursue it
- Parents fought for an extra year for their child to attend school

Parents were asked about accessing post-high school education. They had the following observations.

- Parents had to carry out any inquiry; schools told them to read the calendars
- Parents had to be vigilant and pursue the opportunities themselves
- The transition from children's services to adult services is a struggle
- There is a lack of role models for youth with disabilities
- There is no comprehensive clearing house on resources and options
- NSCC has backtracked on the level of support from ten years ago; they are not strong on helping with intellectual disabilities
- HACL is a big support
- Services are in many silos

Role of the Program

Parents were asked to comment on the Program insofar as the Program played a role in providing a service for their children.

Parents first noted they felt strongly that the schools should not play the role of "holding tanks". ACEE could be done in school only if it were done properly. (If the schools had the resources and felt a commitment to the Program). It should not be forced on the schools. Otherwise, the location of the Program does not really matter. There is some feeling that Bloomfield School is a dumping ground. It is an old school that is no longer used as a school because of declining populations.

Parents were very supportive of the Program but felt one year is not enough. Two years is needed. Five-year funding would be ideal. They suggested long-term connections for the program are needed. The second or third year of the Program would provide a different level of support. It was suggested it might be almost a 'check-in level' where participants can continue an association. Transition, by definition, will require different amounts of time.

Parents did feel there is a lack of communication around the Program. There is a definite need for more of a network among parents. They need more updates on the progress. Parents would like to have heard sooner that progress was not good. Comments included:

There must be more information provided.

There must be parent engagement -- Parents need a parallel process of transition to Independent Living.

A parent network will be important.

Parents were asked if they were willing to pay for a program such as ACEE. Parents at the discussion group said they would be, but were concerned about the principle of universal access that may limit opportunity to some families who might not be able to pay.

Delivery of the Program

When asked about the young adult's experience in the Program, parents had a number of suggestions they wanted to pass on. They first wanted to stress they held considerable knowledge of the child with a disability. Parents saw their role as being an advocate for their child. They feel the Program needs to understand the different disabilities. They asked how informed the staff are of the disability of the individual and the characteristics of that disability. It is a challenge to understand the different syndromes. Parents feel strongly that they know how their child learns. One parent said "It is all about having enough support and not too much". Parents believed the staff is stretched much too thin, especially in light of the many different needs of the students. The staff was seen as very good educators with high expectations of students and parents. Some parents saw ACEE as a very progressive form of education.

It was noted that networks have to be created locally. Parents may be able to give suggestions for work placement through their own networks. Parents wanted students to have work in their own neighbourhood if at all possible. This would require much more parent and community connection with the Program. It is not easy to find work on your own.

Parents had some concern with the Program philosophy. Independent Living is a big step. Steps in between are needed. Independent Living is not immediate or always possible.

The focus may be around an opportunity to become independent. IL was discussed more in the first year. Parents are struggling with IL.

Parents were not aware the Program is less than full-time – they were of the impression it was full time. Parents stressed the importance of the esteem factor associated with a Program. Kids want to belong, to be useful. The need to foster social relationships is very important. (Special Olympics are one social opportunity). The question was raised about the possibility of pairing students by their abilities/strengths.

Parents were asked how they viewed success. They saw it in the following ways:

At the end everyone has a place to go.

There is a continuing network of people.

There is an alumni model.

When asked what was the critical message (through the report) to the various audiences, the following points were made:

- Many with disabilities fall through the cracks and end up in the criminal justice system. I would not like to think our son would end up with care from the criminal justice system.
- The program must be supported through better communication and better relationships.
- These students need to be as equipped as others to their ability.
- Program should be longer than a year.
- If there is sustainable funding for sheltered workshops, why not funding for a Program such as ACEE?

- There is a need for incentives for employers.
- Start the planning earlier. Ontario starts in grade seven. We have known for years these students would be out of school and need something.
- There is a need for a better link with school system.

- ACEE has been an excellent program. I can now see a life for my son – it has come out of this Program.
- Goals must be based on condition of individual participants.
- This is an enabling program. Spending money on these students at this stage is very positive.
- There must be stable funding. The government needs to show commitment.

Employers

The ACEE facilitators provided the evaluation team with a number of businesses in which they have used for job placements.

From the interviews conducted it appears there is a need to have an informative dialogue with the business community regarding their understanding of disabilities in general. The issue with obtaining information from employers and the degree of commitment to a program like ACEE depends upon with whom you talk, and the level of authority within the business the person holds.

A number of employers appreciate the work the participants do and learn and the support they receive from their job coaches. It was reported that in some cases it takes longer to complete specific tasks; however, this is expected and not an issue.

It was expressed that in today's world of work many employees are under stress with the demands of the work place. This has resulted in employees not having time to work and share ideas with individuals on job placement. Reference was also made that many job placement positions do not have goals outlined as to what the business can do to assist an individual. It was also noted there was a lack of business socialization skills which can cause the placement to become isolated. It was suggested that there might be a need to analyze the business so the placement is beneficial to both parties.

Within a broader perspective of business involvement one person remarked that in a number of cases the business community does not understand the disability community and are reluctant to get involved because it would mean a lot of work on their part. It was also stated that businesses have to understand the needs of the person, and as employers they have a duty to accommodate the person so they can complete the task they were hired to do. To add to this situation it was stated that a number of businesses don't understand what to do to accommodate the situation.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion is a synthesis of the findings, analyzed to answer the evaluation question, “what is the role of ACEE in assisting young adults with disabilities in their transitioning to the community?” The evaluators were asked to focus on the role of the Program, in the hope of providing direction to a number of partners. The discussion is presented through the themes that emerged from the interviews and discussion groups and are the matters that require further discussion to advance the role of the Program.

ACEE is Filling a Need

Based upon the findings it can be categorically stated that ACEE is filling a need. The question is however: why is there a need? The issue of providing services for youth with disabilities begins early in life with the public school system. The Special Education Policy provides opportunities for integration into the mainstream of schools and conversely into the broader community and society.

The issue that emerged is youth with disabilities do not access the necessary skills within the public school system to transition into the world of work or other similar environments. There is a lack of service and transitioning opportunity that is afforded to the remainder of the school population. If students with disabilities fail to get these skills and do not have the opportunity to move towards independence, they will always have a feeling of dependence rather than being contributing citizens. The ACEE program provides the bridge from the public school system to the community. It is therefore recommended:

The Department of Education and the Department of Community Services pursue long-term sustainable funding for the ACEE program.

Partnerships are Essential

The majority of students within the public school system graduate by the age of 18. Some students require more time to complete their education so the Education Act allows them to do so until they are 21. Upon completion of high school, youth with disabilities find themselves with very limited opportunities compared to the general school population. When their sons and daughters have left high school, the parents of youth with disabilities feel there is no place for the youth to go, which causes parents to ask where they should turn for help.

The ACEE Program, designed to address this identified need, is built on partnerships. To support this development an ACEE Advisory Committee evolved from a group of interested community partners who contributed actively to the development and implementation of the Program. The role of the committee is to provide advice, guidance, feedback, and recommendations to the ILRC Board on any issue or process, with a view to promoting, supporting, and developing the ACEE program. The role, reach, and involvement of the Advisory Committee is essential to the success of ACEE. It is therefore recommended:

A process be created to ensure an Advisory Committee of partners will continue to sustain the ACEE program.

A Responsive and Flexible Program is needed

All groups noted the different needs and the different levels of need of the participants. It is a setting in which one Program does not fit all. ACEE facilitators were considered to be doing an excellent job at accommodating participant need. It was stressed that the Program had many different outcomes, all of which should be recognized. Add to this, the fact that

parents are asking for a longer program or a program with less intensity in year two and possibly year three. Many respondents in the evaluation stressed that transitioning does not occur at one time. It is a number of things over a period of time. This is a Program for which success cannot be measured by only a couple of indicators. Therefore it is important the Program have distinct components and many measures of success that respond to the multiple needs and suggested needs of participants. It is therefore recommended:

The program have a number of options so that it ensures flexibility in design and delivery.

Independent Living Philosophy

Independent Living (IL) is a philosophy that results in a specific approach to the way in which programs are administered. Independent Living, employed as a program theory, has had excellent success in bringing about change. Questions about the theory IL were raised as it pertains to ACEE. IL in the past may not have involved parents, especially the way in which parents have been involved with their children who are participants in ACEE. Whether IL may be more appropriate for physical disabilities than it is for intellectual disabilities was also a question. In the case of ACEE, IL as a philosophy seemed to have been important, and it worked well as an approach to the program. The extent to which IL as a philosophy and approach makes a contribution to transitioning requires further assessment and communication. The role of the IL philosophy as a part of the program must be clear. It is therefore recommended:

ACEE articulate how IL philosophy makes a contribution to the Program.

The role of IL in ACEE be assessed and a strategy for implementing IL into programs such as ACEE be created.

Involvement of Parents

One challenge of many educational programs for youth, whether within the public schools or delivered as community-based programs, is involving the parents in a meaningful way. The findings have indicated a frustration from the parents on how they were treated by public schools. In addition, as their sons and daughters began the ACEE Program there was some concern and frustration of not being able to share their knowledge that could assist the learning opportunities made available. The philosophy of Independent Living influences the Program delivery in ways the parents initially did not understand.

The idea of having youth with disabilities educated within their own communities is one which can be built upon as the students move forward into the world of work. The ability to approach parents to identify work placement opportunities and potential job placements is a resource to be considered. It is therefore recommended:

The Program and the IL approach must be well explained to parents during the application process.

The role and contribution of parents in ACEE must be encouraged and agreed upon.

Need for Transition Planning

The Special Education Policy was introduced in 1996 with the expectation that students would be transitioning to some form of programming in the community. The findings have

shown there was little preparation, if any, to answer the question “transition to what?” There has been sufficient time to plan for programs.

It has been recognized that transition planning is an integral part of many programs that deal with youth with disabilities. The ACEE Program is no exception, and because it receives the majority of its participants direct from the public schools, there is a need to foster stronger connections. In addition, the needs and challenges of providing services for young adults with disabilities is built upon collaboration among service providers and others. It is important that the process begin at an early stage of a student’s transition plan and not when the student is about to exit from the school. It is therefore recommended:

School Boards carry out their responsibility for transition planning by engaging partners such as ACEE at an early stage in the student’s education.

Integration into Work

Many programs have been designed to provide their participants with a work experience. It has been recognized as early as the 1980s that what students learn in educational institutions and programs should be connected with practical experiences. All reports in this evaluation indicate excellent progress for participants from work-place experience. Employers have indicated that, as this need has increased, the workplace has also changed. Employers and employees are facing challenges such as the global economy, downsizing, and fear of job loss, resulting in some work sites being very stressful and an employer’s time very valuable. Attempting to place students without a disability into work experience is a challenge; trying to place students with disabilities can be very challenging. It is therefore recommended:

The Program should create a work place advisory group that will help to overcome the barriers to work experience and job placement.

The world of work is changing. Employers have said the concept of work experience and the expectations of participants and employers should be reviewed as it pertains to job functions, goals of the placement, the needs of the employer and the participant, the attitude of the employees to work experience, to mention a few. Employers are reluctant to take youth with disabilities largely because of a lack of understanding of disability issues. It is therefore recommended:

The Department of Education and the Department of Community Services bring forward their research and knowledge on the issue of work experience and job placement for persons with disabilities to enhance ACEE.

Location of ACEE

The need for a transition program has been recognized for years. As noted earlier, there appears to have been very little meaningful planning toward such a program. Because no one government department took the responsibility for the Program it seems to be missing the attachment to a particular department’s mandate. In other words, there is not a sense of the need belonging to one department. There was considerable discussion of ACEE moving to NSCC. Where the Program is situated may influence the program delivery. If the Program moves to NSCC will it, or will it be required to, adopt approaches used by NSCC? Will the program be based on a philosophy that supports transitioning in the way IL supports transitioning? The influence of the location of the Program must be discussed and recognized. It is therefore recommended:

The Advisory Committee undertake study of the significance of the location on the approach to a Program such as ACEE.

Program is an Ambassador for Transitioning

ACEE is considered a successful program from many perspectives. The evidence gathered indicates it fulfills a need for those who are leaving high school and transitioning to the community. It provides the participants with the life and employment skills to transition to another role. Both parents and Program facilitators are satisfied with the individual accomplishments. The partnerships through the Advisory Committee are working well. The Program, largely because of the administrative skills of ILRC, is well documented. ACEE, as implemented, needs further study as a program model to be transferred to other locations. It is therefore recommended:

The Program design and accomplishment be documented and presented as a best practice for transitional programming.

APPENDIX A: PROJECT PROFILE

The Project

The Independent Living and Resource Center (ILRC) of Halifax is interested in having the program Access to Community Education and Employment (ACEE) evaluated.

The Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to document the role of ACEE as perceived by those involved and delivered by the ILRC. The challenge is to bring evidence about the program to a document that can be used for a number of purposes including the long rang planning for young adults with disabilities. (YAD) The focus of the evaluation, or the central evaluation question therefore is

What is the role of the program in assisting young adults with disabilities in their transitioning to the broader community?

The plan is to gather information by reviewing documents provided and conducting interviews.

The Evaluation Team

Chaytor Consulting Services Ltd. has been contracted to carry out the work. Team members include Dr. Kaireen Chaytor, and Gordon Michael both of whom have a background in education and community based programming.

Matters for Discussion

- Does the program fill a gap?
- Is the program part of a continuum of service?
- Does the program have the capacity to achieve what it was meant to do?

- How would the future needs of YWD be addressed?

Information will be collected from

- Program participants
- ACEE Facilitators
- Advisory Board Members (ACEE)
- Board Members (ILRC)
- Parents
- Employers
- Funding Department Representatives.

How You Can Help

Your perspective and experience with this topic are needed to assist with the evaluation. You can help by participating in an interview or a discussion group and bringing your perspective to the evaluation.

We would like to complete the data collection by May30th.

Who to Contact

If you wish to contribute or have any questions with regards to this work, please contact:

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