

# **F.** Focus Group Students: Summary



REPORT

# Wisdom2Action: Inclusion January - February 2018

Submitted by Wisdom2Action Consulting Limited

[wisdom2action.org](http://wisdom2action.org)

# BACKGROUND

The Commission on Inclusive Education was created by the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development Karen Casey in March 2017. The Commission released an interim report, *Turning Point*, in June 2017.

The Commission is tasked to:

- complete a literature review of national and international research
- identify best practices from across Canada
- consult broadly with the many partners in inclusive education
- reform inclusive education in Nova Scotia
- develop a strategic plan that includes recommended changes to:
  - policy
  - funding
  - resources
  - teacher training (initial preparation and ongoing professional development)
  - coordination and alignment of programs and services
  - monitoring of inclusive education
  - accountability
- Submit a final report by March 20, 2018

# PURPOSE

Share lived experience and perspective on inclusion education for Commission's final report.

# PARTNERS

The Commission approached Wisdom2Action to hold three focus groups with young people in Halifax between January 25 – February 5, 2018. Wisdom2Action met with youth, parents, volunteers, and staff at Easter Seals Nova Scotia, Laing House, and Pathways to Education.

**Easter Seals Nova Scotia** advocates for a barrier-free Nova Scotia and provides top-quality services promoting mobility, inclusion and independence for Nova Scotians with disabilities. They provide program opportunities for youth with disabilities to participate in camp, sport, and active living programs, to have access to affordable wheelchairs and other mobility equipment, and to acquire workplace skills.

**Laing House** in Halifax is a drop-in centre for youth aged 16 – 29 living with a mood disorder, psychosis and/or anxiety disorder. Based on peer support, members can meet friends who have gone through similar experiences and support each other as they find wellness. Programming includes art, meals, education and employment support, camping, music and more.

**Pathways to Education** in Spryfield is helping youth in low-income communities to graduate from high school and successfully transition onto post-secondary education, training, or employment. Pathways addresses systemic barriers to education by providing leadership, expertise, and a community-based program proven to lower dropout rates.



## ABOUT WISDOM2ACTION

Wisdom2Action (W2A) was created to strengthen the child and youth serving sector in Canada so that it can improve the mental health and well-being of vulnerable children and youth. It promotes the use of research, best and promising practices, and local knowledge in mental health programming for children and youth in challenging contexts.

W2A was established with the goal of strengthening the connection between evidence and practice, and facilitating cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary knowledge sharing and collaboration between those working to improve the lives of vulnerable young people from across Canada.

W2A supports researchers, community based organizations, educators, policy makers, and others working to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children and youth.

**Lisa Lachance** is the Executive Director of Wisdom2Action, whose mission is to build a stronger, more effective and collaborative youth serving sector. Lisa has facilitated community-building and knowledge-sharing workshops for hundreds of people. She is passionate about connecting people and organizations in meaningful ways.

Lisa started her career in the public sector at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) working on children's rights and participation, at the Privy Council Office and as Director of Policy and Planning at the Nova Scotia Department of Finance. She has consulted for Canadian, international, and United Nations organizations on children's rights and gender equality projects, and has expertise in strategic planning, evaluation, community engagement and policy development.

## FACILITATORS

**Kayla Bernard** - Kayla is a Therapeutic Recreation Student at Dalhousie University as well as an active volunteer, currently with the Area Youth Commissioner for Fortress Halifax. She is one of two Canadian delegates selected from Nova Scotia to attend the 62nd United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and Girls in March 2018. Kayla is from Sipekne'katik First Nation in Nova Scotia.

**Hannah Cameron** – Hannah is a Bachelor of Social Work student at Dalhousie University. She has worked in youth leadership and development for 5 years at the Adventure Earth Centre in Halifax. She is enthusiastic about youth engagement in matters that affect them, believing in the "Nothing about us, without us" mantra.

**Brandon Mott** – Brandon manages Communications and Media for Wisdom2Action and facilitates small group sessions with young people. He has coordinated communications since 2012 while completing a degree in music composition at Dalhousie University. Upon graduating in 2016 his role now involves leading social media, graphic design, video production and web related affairs while still maintaining a vivid musical life in his free time.

**Pamela Lovelace** – Pamela is Project Manager for Wisdom2Action. She spent close to a decade with CBC/Radio Canada producing and promoting broadcast and digital content and plans to graduate with Master of Education from Mount Saint Vincent University in May 2018.



*The Wisdom2Action model operates on the principle that everyone in the room has important knowledge to share.*

Wisdom2Action departs from traditional conference style format and have instead created a highly participatory design that allows all participants the opportunity to present their ideas or programs, direct the agenda for the day, and host conversations that are meaningful to them. Our workshop style format offers plenty of opportunity for small group discussion, connection, and knowledge exchange between participants.

Wisdom2Action uses participatory methods and tools from the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Meaningful Conversations approach such as World Cafe and Open Circle to gather input and collaborative ideas from participants.

In January 2018, Wisdom2Action connected with three service organizations in Halifax Regional Municipality to hold three inclusive education focus groups with parents, staff, volunteers and youth ranging in age from 14-25. The participants attended freely and offered insights in their perspectives, lived experience accessing and attempting to access services in the school system.

A typical Wisdom2Action event is held over one to two days providing enough time to dive deep into the subject matter. The Inclusive Education sessions, however, took place over one to two hours. The agenda remained the same for the three sessions. See Appendix E for the agenda overview.

Each session began welcoming participants to make their own name tags using stickers and colourful markers, and to add their preferred pronouns. Everyone was asked to join the group in a circle, a traditional land acknowledgement was given, and the reason for the session was explained. A facilitator explained the core principles of the groups and each person introduced themselves (with the option to pass).

The group then explored what inclusive education means with the crumpled paper exercise. Each person was given two pieces of small paper and markers, and asked to write on each paper their idea of inclusive education. The paper was then crumbled and thrown into the middle of the room. When everyone was finished, the ideas were read out to the group for a full understanding of how everyone envisioned inclusive education.

After a quick set change from open circle to World Café, the group was split into small groups of 3-5 for discussions to share their experiences:

Question 1 - What is school like for you?

Question 2 - What is something you wish could be different at school? (How can we make school better for all students?)

Throughout the discussion, responses were recorded by both participants and facilitators by writing down ideas on large sheets of paper placed around the room. The most common responses were collected and written individually on large post it notes in preparation for the dot voting exercise.

At the end of the session each participant was given 3 dot stickers to post on the top three items they wanted to see change in education to become more inclusive. The session closed with words of appreciation for their time and valuable feedback.

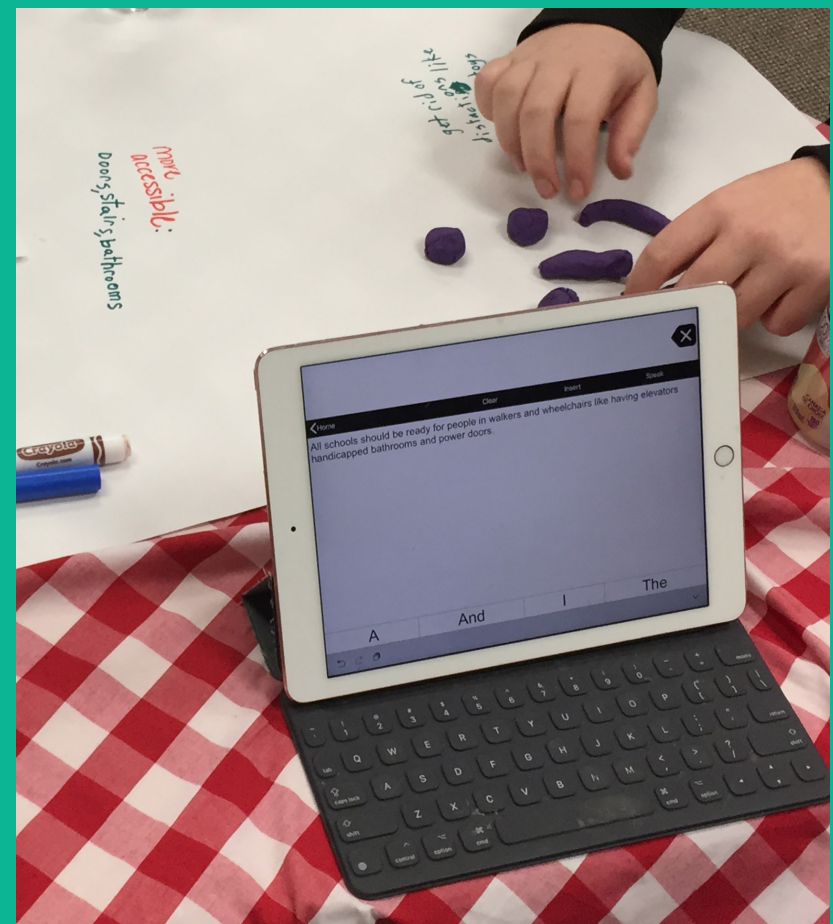
# CONCLUSION

Participants offered valuable insights into what school is currently like for them and what they would change to become more inclusive. Participants prioritized the following actions and ideas:

- 1) More student-centred education: at all three sessions, participants stressed the need to have the student at the centre of education, not the system.
- 2) Be able to eat in class: at all three sessions, students struggle with feeling hungry during class and not being able to eat.
- 3) Better teen health centre: at all three sessions, participants discussed the need for mental health services in the school and the mental health training for staff.
- 4) Early assessment and intervention with parents (collaborative): parents and youth want to work together with education staff to create collaborative plans so families and schools can work together on what is best for the child.
- 5) Graduation requirements need to change for students on IPP (Individual Program Plan): at all three sessions, participants commented how the inflexible graduation requirements limit a students ability to focus on areas where they need additional supports.
- 6) Bridge the gap between traditional school and life experience – what happens when school ends: at all three sessions, participants expressed concern with the gap between school and the working world. Life skills are not being taught to students who will need these life skills as they enter adulthood.
- 7) Higher quality and more EPAs able to support learners and collaborate with teachers.

The most accurate definition of inclusive education that we harvested during these sessions is:

*Inclusion is the right of every individual to access education without discrimination, and with equal opportunity regardless of race, class, religion, ability level or socio-economic status.*





# APPENDIX A - Inclusion, what does it mean to you?

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Below are the individual responses to the questions asked at each session:

*Inclusion is the right of every individual to access education without discrimination, and equal opportunity regardless of race, class, religion, ability level or socio-economic status.*

## Appendix A - Inclusion – what does it mean to you?

*Below are the individual responses to the questions asked at each session:*

*Inclusion is the right of every individual to access education without discrimination, and equal opportunity regardless of race, class, religion, ability level or socio-economic status.*

- Equality - this term was used in many responses
- Respect - this term was used in many responses
- Equal opportunity, involved, right time, right place
- Part of the breakfast program
- Recognition
- Supporting people
- Making sure that everyone has the same chances
- Good learning centre teachers
- It's not happening well in Nova Scotia
- Respecting needs
- Not feeling left out
- Feeling like you are welcome
- Meeting individual needs
- Inclusion is making sure that everyone has the same chance
- Compassion
- Understanding
- Helping
- Works for everyone, not just one type
- Inclusion doesn't mean just including everyone in a classroom, it's different for everyone

- Belonging
- Supporting
- Person centred
- Everyone together
- Having elevators in schools
- Safety
- Everyone can learn
- Everyone belongs
- Thoughtfulness to everyone's differences
- Together
- Meeting & teaching people where they are
- Giving life to potential adaptive activities
- Good Learning Centre teachers
- Adaptive activities
- Diverse
- Intersectional
- Empathetic
- Giving life to someone's potential
- Being part of the breakfast program
- Educating those willing to learn
- Being open to learn what you don't know
- Inclusive education doesn't exist
- Supports all types of learning
- Collaboration with family, child, services, teachers
- Accessibility services and supports for students
- With learning disabilities
- Person / child first
- Everyone is equal

# APPENDIX B - What is school like for you?

## Common Responses:

- Challenging
- Google classroom, typing, online programs, homework
- Noisy, too loud
- Cramped, too many people
- Underfunded
- Bus is always late
- Bathrooms need work
- Not enough time for breaks
- Not allowed to eat in class

## Unique Responses:

- Like a little community
- Student-centred approach
- There's a gap between school (academics) and life experiences (what actually happens at school)
- School is fun now (have device now to talk to people)
- Can be boring, good and interesting
- Broken
- Dis-respectful
- Disappointing
- Mismatch between needs and services/support
- Education not based on students and needs, but based on school
- Grad requirements not relevant, others are needed, shouldn't be a tick box
- Need program for life skills after high school, need organizations to partner with
- Elementary needs to be more student centric
- No individual help
- Expectations
- Confusing school / police relationship
- Understaffed
- Abusive, bullying is tolerated due to burden of proof on victim, integrity is questioned
- Small communities do not have awareness to recognize mental health needs; must be self advocates
- No friends in class
- Sit in desk all the time, instead put chairs in circle for better conversations

- Teachers don't like me
- Teachers are not good role models
- Hard, lots of pressure
- Pressure to be part of the right group
- Everyone knows each other, they're friendly
- Becoming friends with everyone
- Disrespectful people
- People acting out
- Separation from friends
- School looks large
- Excited to choose courses in high school
- Worried about drama at school (tensions)
- No willingness to deal with learning challenges
- No communications between EPAs and teachers
- Schools not using adaptive technologies well
- Mismatch of emotional & health needs and academic capacity
- Gap between school and work/job
- School is repetitive, no stimulation
- Breakfast program is good
- No one takes initiative, parents need to push for services
- Gap between school & transitioning to workforce (ages 18 – 21)
- Inclusion means something different to everyone – client centric
- Good resource teachers vs bad
- Is there a link between IB and suicides?
- Too many senseless tests – there's analysis without solutions being implemented
- In school therapy/help wait is too long
- I'm the "other"
- It's a distraction, not a valued experience
- Hostile
- Too much work, not enough play
- Underfunded
- Stigma
- Zero mental health support
- Uninvolved – school relationships/connections reliant on person's job description
- Assignments are no fun
- Long walk to school



# APPENDIX C - What is something that could be different?

## (How can we make school better for all students?)

### Common Responses:

- Allowed to eat in class
- Add mental health to health education in school, teach children and youth mindfulness techniques
- Breaks and movement, more physical activity, less sitting
- Fix bathrooms
- Hire more qualified teachers
- Support for teachers: resources, money, supplies, small classes
- Fix busing so students are not late and feel welcome when they arrive
- School would be welcoming
- More inclusion in extracurricular activities, not just core subjects; families need to provide their own supports for students
- Teach to prepare students for life, not just university/college – how to do taxes, how to apply for work, interview, demystify the hiring process
- More things to keep children and youth engaged
- More peer learning
- Breakfast clubs and social lunch programs
- Reward based, not punishment
- Elevators
- More resources for ESL, class sizes, co-op placements
- More communications for parents re IPP, create a collaborative plan, make it plain language
- More class choices: gym instead of French
- Early assessments are not enough; follow up needed
- Include mental health training for all staff; tools need to be matched with skills
- Remove stereotypes from teaching: non-judgemental, non-assumptive; support all genders, recognize pronouns, and create inclusive spaces
- Permit students to have agency, be their own advocates with dignity, integrity
- Modernize teaching
- Teach critical and adaptive thinking, and how to reflect critically
- Teach within an anti-oppression framework
- Eliminate hostile violence
- Teachers need to be empowered to protect children/youth and create safe, inclusive spaces
- Sex education teaches physical aspect of sex but not the healthy, emotional, complex relationships
- School system is antiquated
- Learn from methods used private schools, they are doing it right
- Use college style class choices in high school
- Physical education should be more about healthy lifestyles and not just sports: go on hikes or do non-sport activities; do activities that cater to all abilities

### Unique Responses:

- Recognition that parents are experts in their children's lives
- Consistency in teachers
- More accessible: doors, stairs, bathrooms
- Lack of proper staff to help students
- EPAs should be able to form attachments with students
- Direct parent communications with EPAs
- Offer students specific learning directions, courses that are specific to students' interests, homework should not be mandatory, offer independent learning options
- Everyone would be respectful
- Get rid of distraction like phones and toys
- Music programs

# APPENDIX D - What are the top 3 things you would change?

## Participants prioritized the following actions and ideas:

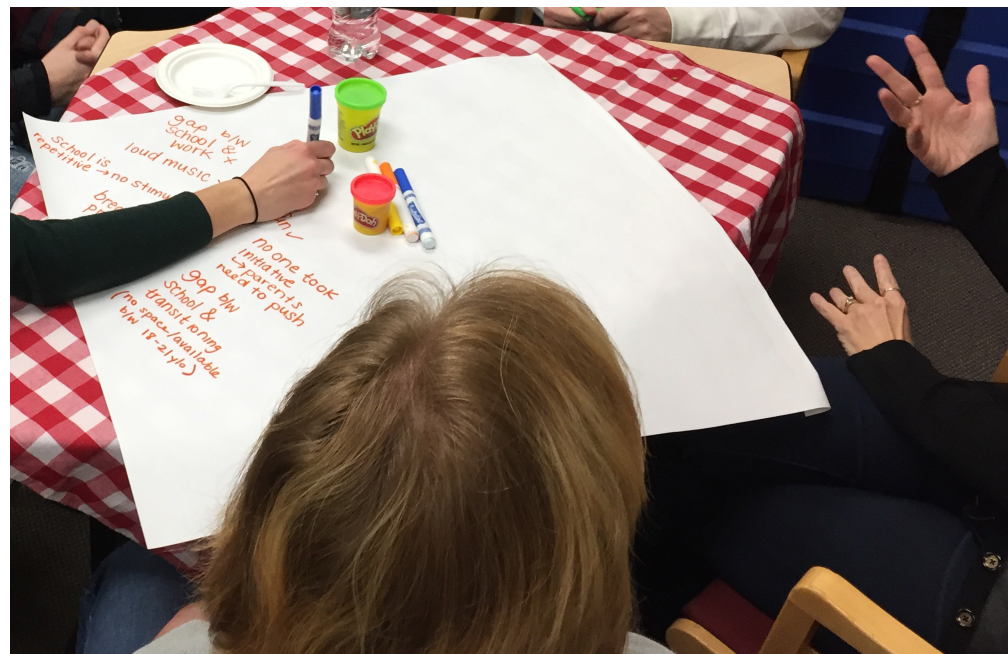
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## Additional priorities to consider:

- Later start times for high schools
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“This was the best focus group I’ve ever attended. It was so fun!”

– Bendu, student at Pathways to Education



## APPENDIX E - MEETING AGENDA

**Registration** - Make your own name tags, add pronoun

Welcome and Framing

Recognition of traditional territory

Who we are, why are we here (talking about schools, what works, how to make them better, want to hear from young people in schools, neutral, open, dedicated to youth engagement, producing a report)

Taking care of ourselves – ask questions, bathroom, snacks, breaks, social media break...

- Your name, pronouns and a couple of words about what school means to you/your feelings about school
- You can pass

**Inclusion – what does it mean to you?**

**World Café – Share your experience**

Question 1 - What is school like for you?

Question 2 – What is something you wish could be different at school? (How can we make school better for all students?)

Record what's working well, what needs to change, ideas for change on big paper posted around room.

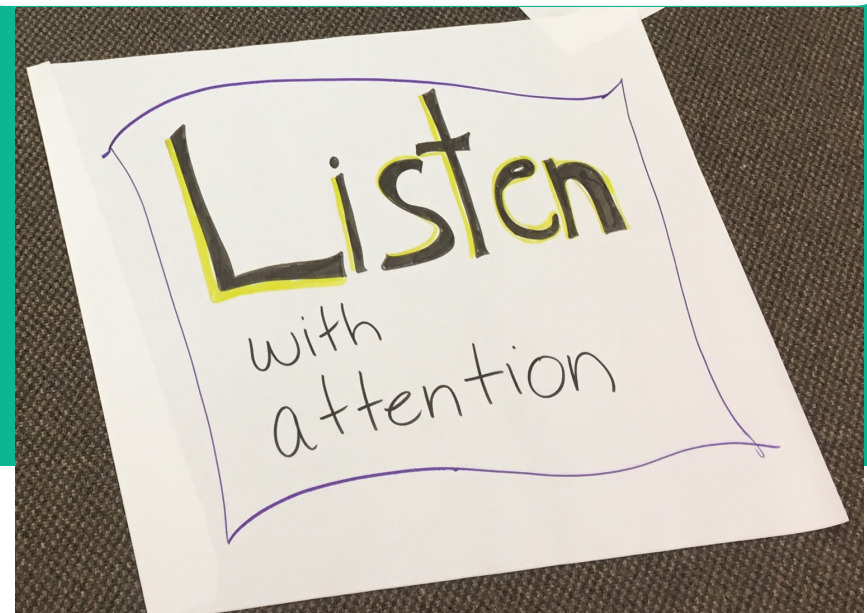
- Priority setting

Reflect together, dot voting (3 each)

- Closing circle

### Circle Principles:

- **Speak with intention**
- **Listen with attention**
- **Take care of the group/share the space**





[www.wisdom2action.org](http://www.wisdom2action.org)



Wisdom2Action has partnered with three knowledge mobilization organizations working in the child and youth sector in Ontario, Quebec, and Nunavut. The Hubs bring tremendous regional capacity and expertise to help local organizations share and adopt evidence-informed practices.

