

world summit
learning disabilities

2008

A Call to Action
World Summit on Learning Disabilities
Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada
April 13-16, 2008

December 5, 2008

Prepared by Burke & Associates Inc.
For the Organizing Committee of the
World Summit on Learning Disabilities

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World Summit on Learning Disabilities

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Highlights of the Call to Action

World Summit on Learning Disabilities

Introduction

On April 13-16, 2008, 189 people from around the world gathered in Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada for the first World Summit on Learning Disabilities.

International experts in the field of medicine, psychology, education, justice, neurological and genetic research, government, law, advocacy, and employment together with parents and individuals with learning disabilities attended the Summit. Representing diverse countries and cultures, consensus quickly emerged among delegates about the critical issues and actions necessary to maximize the human potential of individuals affected by learning disabilities.

The Basics of Learning Disabilities

- Learning disabilities include a number of disorders which affect how a person of average to above average intelligence processes and uses verbal or nonverbal information.
- Learning disabilities are lifelong.
- Conservative estimates of learning disabilities place its incidence at 1 in every 10 people.
- The causes of learning disabilities are unknown. However research clearly indicates it is a neurological condition which is also hereditary in nature.
- Learning disabilities are not caused by lack of motivation or poor teaching, although these factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities.
- Learning disabilities often co-exist with other neurological or health conditions, lending complexity to the issue.
- There are many interrelated long term consequences of learning disabilities that include but are not limited to higher instances of unemployment or underemployment and poorer physical or mental health.
- There are economic benefits to society for effectively addressing and supporting people with learning disabilities. The economic benefits accrue from the reduction in use of health, justice and social service programs and systems.
- Individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system.
- A continued emphasis on research is imperative to help understand the causes and consequences of learning disabilities.

Identification of Learning Disabilities

- Learning disabilities can be identified across the lifespan, including children of pre-school age.
- The mechanisms to identify learning disabilities should be appropriate to a person's age and circumstance.

- Professionals in the fields of health and education should be provided with pre-service training on the identification of learning disabilities.
- Tools should be developed and widely disseminated to health professionals to enable them to better consider learning issues as a regular part of health maintenance.
- Identification of learning disabilities is important even after people have left school and have entered the workforce.
- Identification of learning disabilities can be of vital importance in providing an individual with self knowledge and insight into why they may struggle or find particular tasks difficult.

Intervention

- Effective interventions exist to support individuals with learning disabilities so they learn and thrive, and become productive members of society.
- Each person with learning disabilities is unique. Intervention should be differentiated to address a person's unique set of needs and the environments in which they work and learn. Factors which impact intervention include but are not limited to:
 - The manner in which a person is affected by their learning disability
 - Co-existing conditions
 - Their needs and major activities during their life
 - Their social and environmental context, including support systems
- Intervention should occur at the earliest possible age.
- Supports and structures, including accommodations are vital interventions throughout the lifespan.
- Implementation of public policy can prevent exposure to neurotoxins that reduce the risk of damaging developing brains which can lead to learning disabilities and other neurodevelopmental disorders.
- Building and maintaining health is vitally important to build capacity and resiliency and maximize the wellbeing of individuals with learning disabilities.

Managing Transitions

- Management of transitions is an important intervention for people with learning disabilities. There are multiple transition points throughout life; the person with learning disabilities benefits from structures and supports to manage these transitions.
- Effective exchange of information among everyone involved is a necessary component of change management.

Learning Disabilities as a Human Rights Issue

- Learning disabilities are clearly and unequivocally a lifelong legitimate disability.
- People with learning disabilities merit protection under human rights legislation to ensure that they enjoy all rights and privileges and have the potential to become productive contributing citizens.
- Human rights legislation exists to protect all individuals. The existence of legislation or policy alone is not enough. Human rights legislation needs to be enforced.

- While the preservation of human rights is a responsibility shared among citizens, it is the elected officials who are ultimately responsible for ensuring the rights and freedoms for all people in a democratic society.

The Actions – What needs to be done?

Effective public policy must be established to achieve the following:

- The earliest possible identification of learning disabilities
- Identification of learning disabilities throughout the lifespan
- Improved pre-service and continuing education of health and education professionals to enable them to both identify and support people with learning disabilities
- Differentiated support and intervention throughout the lifespan
- Support for accommodations for individuals with learning disabilities during basic and post secondary education, and into the workplace
- Improvements in written communication by public sector agencies to enhance the accessibility and comprehension of that material by people with learning disabilities.
- Supports to facilitate transition among individuals with learning disabilities
- Strict and unwavering adherence to the human rights
- Prevention of neonatal and post natal exposure to neurotoxins
- Continued and active support to conduct research on the causes, interventions and implications of learning disabilities
- Recognition that by maximizing the potential of people with learning disabilities, everyone's potential is maximized

A Call to Action: World Summit on Learning Disabilities

Introduction

On April 13-16, 2008, 189 people from around the world gathered in Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada for the first World Summit on Learning Disabilities.

International experts in the field of medicine, psychology, education, justice, neurological and genetic research, government, law, advocacy, and employment together with parents and individuals with learning disabilities attended the Summit. Representing diverse countries and cultures, consensus quickly emerged among delegates about the critical issues and actions necessary to maximize the human potential of individuals affected by learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities are lifelong. They affect each person differently. The needs of every person with learning disabilities also change or evolve throughout their lifetime. The educational, social, economic and health impacts of learning disabilities are far reaching and infiltrate every aspect of our modern society. For this reason, learning disabilities are a complex and challenging issue for policy makers to address.

Notwithstanding this inherent complexity, the emerging evidence based research and the practical experience of professionals attending the World Summit led to some highly effective solutions that can be easily implemented to benefit not only those with learning disabilities, but the population as a whole.

This White Paper attempts to describe succinctly for policy makers and those individuals who inform policy, the crucial issues and collective call to action emerging from the deliberation of delegates at the Summit. This document is predicated upon the premise that policy makers are genuinely interested in representing and supporting their constituents. Using the conclusions identified by Summit delegates together with their call to action, policy makers can be responsible for spearheading positive changes to enhance the human potential of their constituents. Action in this way will also improve the overall social and economic fabric of a jurisdiction or nation by mediating or lessening the complex education, health, and employment issues associated with learning disabilities. Action of this nature means that everyone wins.

Format and Focus of White Paper

This document is neither designed nor intended as an in-depth accounting of proceedings from the Summit. Readers wishing more detailed information are invited to contact Summit organizers to access the scholarly articles and detailed material that informed the

World Summit Focus on Learning Disabilities

The Basics of Learning Disabilities

deliberation of Summit delegates.¹ However, where appropriate, this document does present factual information designed to provide context for readers.

Throughout the document, important conclusions or findings are summarized in clearly identified Highlights Sections. The Highlights Sections are intended as a tool for individuals who may wish to abstract key findings of the Summit in briefing notes and backgrounders. The Highlights Sections also serve as a quick review of key outcomes of the World Summit.

A factor which adds to the complexity of learning disabilities is that it frequently co-exists with other conditions. It is estimated that as many as one third to one-half of people with learning disabilities are also affected by attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In addition to ADHD, there are many other conditions which co-exist with learning disabilities.

This fact was recognized in planning the Summit. However, the decision was made during the formative stages of planning to focus on learning disabilities. This decision was for pragmatic reasons and should not be interpreted to mean that the committee felt co-occurrences were unimportant. Indeed, the fact that learning disabilities do co-occur with other conditions exacerbates their complexity.

What are learning disabilities?²

Confusion abounds among the public and policy makers about learning disabilities. Persistent and inaccurate myths are that people with learning disabilities are cognitively impaired and unable to learn, or that they reverse letters when writing. These views are inaccurate and fail to reflect the scope and complexity of learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities refer to a number of disorders which can affect how a person acquires, organizes, retains, understands or uses verbal or nonverbal information. People with learning disabilities have average to above average intellect and reasoning and are fully able to learn given the right intervention.

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- oral language including listening, speaking and understanding
- reading including word recognition and comprehension
- written language
- mathematics

¹ Readers wishing more detail on Summit proceedings should go to www.foothillsacademy.org.

² Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, as abstracted from their website at www.ldac-taac.ca.

"Learning disabilities are not outgrown. They are lifelong." Dr. Maureen Lovett, Conference Speaker

Individuals with learning disabilities may also have difficulties with organizational and social skills.

The impact of learning disabilities changes over the course of a person's life. These changes are affected by a person's strengths and needs and the manner in which they interact with their environment.

Learning disabilities are suspected when a person unexpectedly under-achieves at school or can only achieve with unusually high levels of effort and support.

Causes of Learning Disabilities^{3,4}

The precise cause of learning disabilities is unknown. What is known is that learning disabilities are due to genetic and/or neurobiological factors or injury that changes brain functioning in a way that affects one or more of the processes related to learning. For this reason, learning disabilities are lifelong. People do not grow out of learning disabilities though they may develop effective coping strategies.

The existence of learning disabilities is not associated or influenced by a person's gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status. Learning disabilities are not caused by hearing or vision problems, lack of motivation or poor teaching, although these factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities.

Exciting research is occurring focused on the genetic elements of learning disabilities. This and other high quality research on learning disabilities will be instrumental in providing valuable information about how to prevent or minimize its impact.

Conditions which Co-exist with Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities often co-exist with other conditions including attentional, behavioural and emotional disorders, sensory impairments or other medical conditions. The term atypical brain development (ABD) is being used more frequently as a unifying concept to describe a range of developmental/neurological disorders including learning disabilities and many of the other co-occurring conditions.⁵ There is some evidence to suggest that these neurological disorders may have a common etiology; research is continuing to explore this hypothesis.

Secondary Disabilities

Secondary disabilities or conditions occur as a result of primary disabilities. Secondary disabilities can either be prevented or

³ Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, as abstracted from their website at www.ldac-taac.ca.

⁴ SIEGEL Linda S., "Issues in the Definition and Diagnosis of Learning Disabilities," *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 1999, vol. 32(4):304-319.

⁵ GILGER Jeffrey W. & KAPLAN Bonnie J., "Atypical brain development: A conceptual framework for understanding developmental learning disabilities." *Developmental neuropsychology*. 2001, vol. 20(2): 465-481.

lessened in their intensity with better intervention of the primary condition.

Secondary disabilities are common among people with learning disabilities – particularly in circumstances where the learning disabilities have been identified later in life (or not at all) or where there has not been appropriate intervention and support.

When learning disabilities are the precipitating cause of a secondary disability, the type and severity of the latter will vary based on the person's strengths, how they interact with their environment, and the effectiveness of the interventions to address the learning disabilities or the secondary disability. The situation becomes particularly complex if the individual is also affected by other co-existing conditions. Common secondary disabilities include mental health conditions including depression, substance abuse and addictions, and suicidal ideation which may result in suicide.⁶

Long Term Consequences of Learning Disabilities^{7,8}

The long term consequences of learning disabilities are generally interrelated and can be severe. Individuals with learning disabilities are:

- Less likely to succeed at school.
- Less likely to achieve high literacy levels
- More likely to be involved with criminal activities and the justice system
- More likely to report overall lower mental health
- Less likely to succeed at work
- More likely to be unemployed or earn less
- More likely to be economically disadvantaged or live in poverty

"Pay now or pay a lot more later!" Conference Delegate

The evidence is compelling that failure to address learning disabilities at the earliest possible stage results in a significant societal cost incurred through increased demands in the health, justice, social services, and social assistance systems. Opportunity costs are also incurred as individuals with learning disabilities are inhibited from maximizing their potential and thereby contributing to society.

Incidence of Learning Disabilities

Conservative estimates of learning disabilities place its incidence at 1 in every 10 people. It is commonly accepted that the incidence

⁶ A Literature Framework to Guide the Research Study: Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities. PACFOLD. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, August 10, 2005.

⁷ Waiting to Fail – Wanting to Succeed: Putting a Canadian Face on Learning Disabilities (PACFOLD). Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, August 10, 2005.

⁸ MCBRIDE, Hazel E. A. & SIEGEL, Linda S., "Learning Disabilities and Adolescent Suicide." *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 1997, vol. 30 (6): 652-659.

rates are much higher with some studies citing a level of 1 out of every 5 people. This makes learning disabilities the most common of all disabilities.

Highlights – The Basics of Learning Disabilities

- Learning disabilities include a number of disorders which affect how a person of average to above average intelligence processes and uses verbal or nonverbal information.
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- The causes of learning disabilities are unknown. However research clearly indicates it is a neurological condition which is also hereditary in nature.
- Learning disabilities are not caused by lack of motivation or poor teaching, although these factors may further complicate the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities.
- Learning disabilities often co-exist with other neurological or health conditions, lending complexity to the issue.
- There are many interrelated long term consequences of learning disabilities that include but are not limited to higher instances of unemployment or underemployment and poorer physical or mental health.
- There are economic benefits to society for effectively addressing and supporting people with learning disabilities. The economic benefits accrue from the reduction in use of health, justice and social service programs and systems.
- Individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system.
- A continued emphasis on research is imperative to help understand the causes and consequences of learning disabilities.

Identification of Learning Disabilities

Identification of Learning Disabilities

A resounding concern expressed by Summit delegates was that effective systems are not in place to identify individuals with learning disabilities. Identification is a critical prerequisite to ensure a person receives proper support and to guard against the development of secondary disabilities.

Delegates debated the differences between screening and identification. Screening is generally defined as the process of determining if an individual is at risk for a condition. If determined to

be at risk, then monitoring measures are put in place to see if further assessment or evaluation is required. Assessment is generally regarded as the more thorough and in-depth process of evaluating a person to determine if they have an illness or disorder.

Delegates concluded that the identification of learning disabilities should best be regarded as a process or continuum that includes increasingly more detailed evaluation from screening to comprehensive assessment. The type and nature of the evaluation should be contingent upon the person's age and circumstance.

Pre-School Aged Population

Identification of learning disabilities is possible among pre-school aged children. Identification at the earliest possible stage in the life of a person is ideal to guard against the long term negative consequences of learning disabilities, including secondary disabilities.

- Health care and early education professionals are generally unaware of the risk factors and initial presentation of learning disabilities among the pre-school aged population. Pre-service training generally does not include this type of instruction.
- Systematic processes are not in place nor are tools readily available to identify children at risk for or exhibiting evidence of learning disabilities during periodical health examinations and assessments that occur in the preschool years.

Early Identification

Signs of learning disabilities are often overlooked during the kindergarten and early education years. Delays or difficulties in learning are often attributed to natural variations in early childhood development. Simply put, the warning signs of learning disabilities are often missed, as are the opportunities to begin intervention to mitigate the long term negative impact of learning disabilities.

Tools and supports for screening and early identification of learning disabilities exist for use with the kindergarten and early education populations. However, processes are not in place to systematically identify learning disabilities at the earliest possible stage of a person's educational career, including the pre-school period.

- Teacher training programs need to be enriched to provide new teachers with the skills to identify learning disabilities and to instruct children who may be affected.
- Continuing professional development is required to provide teachers and health care providers presently in practice with the necessary skills to identify and utilize the most effective strategies to teach and work with individuals with learning disabilities.

"We should be training those of us who work with children to observe if they are achieving their developmental milestones ... psycho-educational assessments should be the final stage of the process."
Panelist, Assessment and Diagnosis

- Awareness among health care providers should be enhanced and tools created and disseminated to ensure health professionals are considering learning issues as a regular part of health maintenance.

Identification Across all Life Stages

The “wait to fail” strategy used in many jurisdictions to provide initial evidence of learning disabilities is sub-optimal and ultimately jeopardizes the long term potential of a person.

The prevailing “wait to fail” practice means failure to identify learning disabilities is a common occurrence.

- Strategies to identify learning disabilities across the life span are required, beginning at the earliest possible life stages and continuing through school years, post secondary education (if applicable) and into the employment phase of a person’s life.
- Identification of learning disabilities can be of vital importance in providing an individual with self knowledge and insight into why they may struggle or find particular tasks difficult.
- Because learning disabilities are known to be heritable, identification of learning disabilities within an adult population may also provide insight into the learning needs and potential disabilities of children of those adults.

Highlights – Identification of Learning Disabilities

- Learning disabilities can be identified across the lifespan, including children of pre-school age.
- The mechanisms to identify learning disabilities should be appropriate to a person’s age and circumstance.
- Professionals in the fields of health and education should be provided with pre-service training on the identification of learning disabilities.
- Tools should be developed and widely disseminated to health professionals to enable them to better consider learning issues as a regular part of health maintenance.
- Identification of learning disabilities is important even after people have left school and have entered the workforce.
- Identification of learning disabilities can be of vital importance in providing an individual with self knowledge and insight into why they may struggle or find particular tasks difficult.

Intervention: Supporting the Person with Learning Disabilities

"It is easy to be discouraged if you think you are in it by yourself. Government, family, and different services providers all have a part to play. We all have a shared responsibility."
Panelist

"If we treat the learner as if they were what they ought to be, we will help them become what they are capable of being." Dr. Jim Koller, Conference Speaker

"Without effective intervention, learning disabilities are lifelong, chronic, handicapping conditions." Dr. Maureen Lovett, Conference Speaker

Intervention

Identification of learning disabilities is one part of the formula. But identification alone is insufficient to mediate the potential long term negative effects of learning disabilities. Intervention is required.

Effective interventions exist to support individuals with learning disabilities to learn and thrive. Every person with learning disabilities is unique in the co-existing conditions which they may have, along with their strengths, aptitudes, learning challenges, and environment. Moreover, intervention is not solely an educational issue, as the impact of learning disabilities are interwoven into many aspects of daily life. For this reason, intervention must be differentiated to address a person's unique set of needs. This lends to the complexity of designing and delivering effective intervention.

Notwithstanding this inherent complexity, there are highly effective solutions that can be easily implemented to benefit not only those with learning disabilities, but the population as a whole.

As a general principle, the earlier the intervention, the better. This principle capitalizes upon brain plasticity that is particularly evident during childhood. However, this principle should and must not be construed to mean that intervention at later stages in a person's life is ineffective or unwarranted. Intervention is effective and indicated at all stages of life and in multiple environments.

Early Intervention

Highly effective intervention exists to identify kindergarten and grade one children at risk for reading difficulties and provide instruction to enhance their phonological awareness. Reading disabilities, also commonly known as dyslexia, are the most common learning disability estimated at about 80% of all learning disabilities. Dyslexia is characterized by poor phonological awareness or inability to differentiate the phonemes (or small sound units) that make up language.

Longitudinal evaluation of students screened in kindergarten indicates that about 24% of English speaking children and 37% of English as a second language students are at risk for reading difficulties. Risk drops precipitously to 2 to 3% for this cohort in grade 4 after a period of classroom based intervention.⁹ This research clearly and definitely demonstrates that early intervention is effective and necessary.

While the example above illustrates reading disabilities, it is important to recognize that there are many types of learning disabilities that influence how a person learns.

⁹ LESAUX, N.K. & SIEGEL, L.S., "The development of reading in children who speak English as a second language." *Developmental Psychology*, 2003, Vol. 39: 1005-1019.

Early intervention also has the immense value of reducing the need for more intense intervention as a child grows older and is impacted by the attendant loss of self esteem and increased incidence of secondary disabilities that occur with failure to succeed at school. Ultimately, early intervention is a less costly and highly effective strategy.

Accommodations as Intervention

It would be inconceivable for any civilized person to insist that if a blind person tried harder, he or she could see. However, the equivalent occurs every day to individuals who are challenged by learning disabilities. Accommodations is the term used to describe supports, tools, and/or services provided or used by individuals to compensate for the difficulties they may have which arise from their disabilities. Braille and the use of audio books are examples of accommodations used by individuals who are blind or have low vision.

Many accommodations exist for use in educational settings, the workplace and home environments for people with learning disabilities. These accommodations include but are not limited to additional time to complete school work assignments or tests, the opportunity to take audio rather than written tests, and the use of assistive or adaptive technology like speech to text software, word prediction software, organizational devices, digital recorders, and the like. The specific accommodations used are based on an individual's needs.

Accommodations do not alter the actual requirements to complete or master a subject or assignment, but rather the process or manner in which such mastery or completion is demonstrated.

Accommodations are part of the inventory of interventions for support of individuals with learning disabilities:

- The use of accommodations should be embodied within educational policy at the basic and post secondary level.
- Use of accommodations should be recognized as an effective and necessary support for people with learning disabilities in all areas of living.

Prevention as Intervention

The relationship between neurotoxins and permanent alterations in brain development and function, including learning, has been well established. The prenatal brain and brain of infants are particularly vulnerable to impact from neurotoxins that would otherwise not affect the health of adults. Only a small number of chemicals have been evaluated for their potential to adversely affect brain development and function. The World Health Organization is among many international bodies that are calling for the inclusion of developmental neurotoxicity test (DNT) data in assessing the safety

of pesticides, food-additives, drugs, cosmetics, and chemicals used commonly in cleaning and household products. This measure is of vital importance to preventing the impact of neurotoxins on developing brains that could lead to learning disabilities and other neurodevelopmental disorders.^{10,11}

Promoting Health

Good nutrition, exercise and stress management are all factors which promote health. They also enhance resiliency and the ability of an individual to better address daily challenges. It is self evident that people affected by learning disabilities do experience daily challenges. Poor health is not the cause of learning disabilities; however, research has demonstrated that poor health may be a consequence of learning disabilities.

The promotion of good health practices is an important intervention to enable the person with learning disabilities to maximize their resiliency, capacity and ability to perform at the best possible level. Building and maintaining health is particularly important as learning disabilities are often associated with poorer health status.

Highlights – Intervention

- Effective interventions exist to support individuals with learning disabilities so they learn and thrive, and become productive members of society.
- Each person with learning disabilities is unique. Intervention should be differentiated to address a person's unique set of needs and the environments in which they work and learn. Factors which impact intervention include but are not limited to:
 - The manner in which a person is affected by their learning disability
 - Co-existing conditions
 - Their needs and major activities during their life
 - Their social and environmental context, including support systems
- Intervention should occur at the earliest possible age.
- Supports and structures, including accommodations are vital interventions throughout the lifespan.
- Implementation of public policy can prevent exposure to neurotoxins that reduce the risk of damaging developing brains with can lead to learning disabilities and other neurodevelopmental disorders.

¹⁰ RODIER, P.M., "The developing brain as a target of toxicity." *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 1995 Vol.103, (Suppl. 6): 73-76.

¹¹ WEISS, B. "Vulnerability of children and the developing brain to neurotoxic hazards." *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 2000, Vol. 108 (Suppl. 3)

Managing Transitions

“Transition to post secondary education begins long before students end up in grade 12. It is a process that ideally begins early...”
Ms. Jane Drover, Panelist,
Transitions

- Building and maintaining health is vitally important to build capacity and resiliency and maximize the wellbeing of individuals with learning disabilities.

Managing Life Changes

Transitions are a challenge for many people. Transitions are difficult for people with learning disabilities, particularly if they also are affected by co-occurring conditions. The management of transitions for the person with learning disabilities is an important subset of the repertoire of interventions.

The importance of transitions in the life and well being of people with learning disabilities is of such significance that it merited deliberation by Summit delegates independent of the focused discussion on interventions. Key considerations included the following:

- There are multiple transitions points throughout life; systems and structures should be developed to facilitate these transitions.
- Supports are required to help manage the following ongoing transitions across the lifespan. They include:
 - Play school to early childhood education (ECS)
 - ECS to grade one
 - Elementary to junior high school/high school
 - Junior or middle school to senior high school
 - Senior high school to post-secondary education
 - School to work environments
 - Job changes and/or entry in and out of the workforce.
- Transition from elementary school to high school and high school to post-secondary education are pivotal transition points.
- Effective exchange of information is a necessary component of change management.

Highlights – Managing Transitions

- Management of transitions is an important intervention for people with learning disabilities. There are multiple transition points throughout life; the person with learning disabilities benefits from structures and supports to manage these transitions.
- Effective exchange of information among everyone involved is a necessary component of change management.

Learning Disabilities as a Human Rights Issue

Human Rights

Learning disabilities are clearly and unequivocally a legitimate disability which conservatively affects a minimum of one in every ten people. Human rights legislation is designed to protect against the discrimination of people on the basis of their ascribed characteristics. These characteristics include gender, ethnicity and disability. The preservation of human rights is the hallmark of enlightened jurisdictions and countries.

All citizens share in the preservation of human rights. The preservation of human rights occurs in both formal and informal ways. Informal mechanisms may relate to choices associated with acceptance of a person on the basis of their character rather than their characteristics. Informal preservation of human rights can extend to something as simple as inviting and involving an immigrant child into a game on the playground. Formal mechanisms are those policies that are established and used by governmental organizations, particularly with respect to access to services and benefits.

It may be argued that full preservation of human rights occurs when there is total and complete acceptance of all individuals into every aspect of society. Tolerance and understanding, where accommodations are necessary to support an individual, do not always occur for people with learning disabilities. While there has been progress, there remains significant opportunities for improvement to ensure that:

- Education is a fundamental right for all people, including those with learning disabilities. The inevitable implication of this fundamental right is that people with learning disabilities must have access to effective education that addresses their learning challenges at the earliest possible point in their educational careers.
- Public policy is refined to support people with learning disabilities to use accommodations to demonstrate their mastery of a subject area in basic and post secondary education, for trade and journeyman certificates, and when they enter the workplace.
- Public sector agencies improve their communication with their clients to ensure that written material is prepared in a manner that respects reading difficulties. Communication with public sector agencies should not be restricted to only the written form.

While all citizens share the responsibility to preserve human rights, it is the elected officials and policy makers who have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring rights and responsibilities for all people. Policies and legislation exist which speak to the protection of human rights. The existence of these policies alone does not guarantee that these rights will be preserved.

Highlights – Learning Disabilities as a Human Rights Issue

- Learning disabilities are clearly and unequivocally a lifelong legitimate disability.
- People with learning disabilities merit protection under human rights legislation to ensure that they enjoy all rights and privileges and have the potential to become productive contributing citizens.
- Human rights legislation exists to protect all individuals. The existence of legislation or policy alone is not enough. Human rights legislation needs to be enforced.
- While the preservation of human rights is a responsibility shared among citizens, it is the elected officials who are ultimately responsible for ensuring the rights and freedoms for all people in a democratic society.

The Call to Action

The Need to Act

Learning disabilities are a legitimate lifelong condition which conservatively affects a minimum of one out of every ten individuals.

The long term implications of unaddressed learning disabilities include the failure to maximize human potential and a significant societal and financial cost. The latter results because people with learning disabilities are less likely to succeed at school, are unemployed or underemployed, and have lower overall level mental and physical health status.

Despite the importance of learning disabilities as a public policy issue, there remains confusion and myths about this condition.

There is much that is known about learning disabilities and much that is yet to be discovered. Among the known facts:

- Learning disabilities are the result of how the brain acquires, organizes, retains, understands and uses verbal and non-verbal information. It is a neurological condition. It is not caused because of laziness or lack of motivation.
- People with learning disabilities are able to learn, thrive and become productive members of society.
- People with learning disabilities are of average to above average intellect.
- Learning disabilities tends to run in families and have an inheritable characteristic. However, the precise cause of learning disabilities is unknown.
- Learning disabilities frequently co-exist with other disorders.
- Learning disabilities are lifelong; people do not grow out of learning disabilities.

"Simultaneous and coherent action on a number of levels is necessary to effect change." Yude Hentelhof, Speaker

- It is possible to identify learning disabilities very early in life.
- Effective interventions exist to help a person with learning disabilities thrive and achieve at all ages.
- People with learning disabilities who are not supported may develop secondary disabilities.
- Prenatal or postnatal exposure to neurotoxins affects brain development and may play a role in causing learning disabilities.

There are simple and effective measures which can be taken to minimize the negative impact of learning disabilities and maximize the human potential of people affected by this condition.

When a person with learning disabilities is supported to thrive and achieve, everyone benefits:

- The person with learning disabilities
- His or her family
- His or her community
- His or her country or jurisdiction

The Actions – What needs to be done?

To realize these benefits, effective public policy must be established to achieve the following:

- The earliest possible identification of learning disabilities
- Identification of learning disabilities throughout the lifespan
- Improved pre-service and continuing education of health and education professionals to enable them to both identify and support people with learning disabilities
- Differentiated support and intervention throughout the lifespan
- Support for accommodations for individuals with learning disabilities during basic and post secondary education, and into the workplace
- Recognition by public sector agencies that written material must be prepared in a manner that respects reading difficulties and that communication with clients should not be restricted to only the written form.
- Supports to facilitate transition among individuals with learning disabilities
- Prevention of neonatal and post natal exposure to neurotoxins

Further Information

- Strict and unwavering adherence to human rights
- Continued and active support to conduct research on the causes, interventions and implications of learning disabilities
- Recognition that by maximizing the potential of people with learning disabilities, everyone's potential is maximized

Readers wishing more detail and/or the academic substantiation for all material contained in this report are invited to go to www.foothillsacademy.org.