



# ***“THREE CHALLENGES”***

**Update on the 2023 State of the Child Reporting**

### An Early Look At the Indicators

Each year, the Office of the Child & Youth Advocate releases a State of the Child Report. In that report, a number of indicators are updated in order to provide a look at the full state of child development in New Brunswick from children's health and educational achievement to their family and social relationships and community engagement.

With our partners, the Advocate's office is again preparing for the State of the Child Report in 2023. In beginning to compile the data, the Advocate has made the decision to share three particular challenges that appear to be urgent and compelling. These challenges will be elaborated upon in the Advocate's keynote address, "***Three Challenges***," to be presented at the New Brunswick Health Research Council's annual Research Week as part of the run-up to International Children's Day or National Child Day on November 20<sup>th</sup>.

These three challenges for elected officials and community leaders reflect areas identified by the Advocate as in need of urgent action. International Children's Day is an excellent opportunity to reflect upon what our charge to provide the next generation of New Brunswickers with opportunities greater than the ones we had. This charge is at the heart of what it means to be a community. Just as someone put our needs first when we were dependent upon others to put our interests first, today's children depend upon the willingness of adults to put their interests before our own. The three challenges the Advocate will present speak to three things we owe the next generation so that they may be successful.

The Advocate's "***Three Challenges***" address will urge New Brunswick's leaders to reverse worrying trends in three urgent areas where children deserve better. They are:

- Providing children the ability to read and learn by the time they are eight years old.
- Providing teens the mental health services and strong communities they need to feel safe and secure in preparing for adulthood.
- Providing the next generation of citizens with the tools to learn about and shape the world around them as they find their voice.

These three areas – literacy, mental health, and civics education – from the Advocate's appeal in this year's "***Three Challenges***" update upon the State of the Child.

#### Challenge #1: Early Literacy

By the end of Grade 2, children must make the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Those who master this fundamental skill do better in future academic achievement, social inclusion and employment prospects. Children who struggle to read are at much higher risk of tuning out of school and even the community around them. Literacy is not only key to the child's development, but also essential to the future economic and social success of New Brunswick. Our province has paid the price in the past for low levels of adult literacy, which raises the need for social services and drives away jobs and investment.

The best way to raise the adult literacy rate is to ensure that high school graduates are literate. Because it takes time to turn around years of poor literacy results among adults, there can sometimes be a flippant presumption that years of effort have not produced meaningful change. This is wrong. New Brunswick has had success in raising student reading and literacy results, in some years even leading the country in increases to the student success rate. For example, the cohort of children who entered Grade 1 in 2008-09 set record highs in Grade 2 literacy scores. That same cohort of young New Brunswickers continued success, providing New Brunswick with its best-ever results in the Pan-Canadian Assessment Programme (PCAP) survey of eighth- graders. In fact, the anglophone sector improvement was the highest in Canada in the 2016 PCAP results in reading, math and science assessments.

However, while New Brunswick has shown it can make great strides in early literacy, we have also proven capable of squandering those gains. The recent Grade 4 literacy results for the anglophone school system showed only 59% of students reading at (the expected) level. That number is ominous, because as the trends will show, we have allowed a decade of achievement to be completely erased by the decade that follows.

***Percentage of Students Meeting The Standard for Reading, Grade 2 (Anglophone School System)***

2003-04	59.4%
2006-07	71.6%
2009-10	83.6%
2012-13	79.5%
2015-16	73.8%
2018-19 * (Grade 4 assessment)	67.2%
2020-21 *	68.6%
2021-22 *	59.5%

The arrival at 59% is ominous, because it returns New Brunswick to the 2003 level of student literacy which prompted multipartisan concern and focus on raising student literacy scores, and wipes out the nearly-25% of improvement. The cycle is not quite as complete on the Francophone side, but the trend is similar.

***Percentage of Students Meeting The Standard for Reading, Grade 2 (Francophone School System)***

2004-05	51%
2006-07	63%
2009-10	77%
2012-13	77%
2013-14	75.4%
2015-16	79%
2018-19	75.1%
2021-22	61.6%

Regrettably, the decline has been reflected in subsequent national PISA and PCAP assessments.

The Advocate notes that policy and funding decision made by government matters. It is not true that years of decisions have not made a difference. Instead, some decisions led to significant gains and other decisions rolled those gains back. In the **“Three Challenges”** address, the Advocate will urge government to take steps to reverse these declines, including:

- Placing a renewed focus on early literacy and taking steps to ensure consistent school improvement, including the use of literacy specialists, professional learning communities and school improvement plans at the local level.
- The number of students reporting a learning exceptionality has grown from 26.7% in 2018-19 to 34.8% in 2021-22. The number of students with high levels of oppositional behaviour is stable but high at 24%. Between 2018-19 and 2021-22, increases are reported in cases of students with ADHD (9.6% to 12.6%), Autism Spectrum Disorder (2.3% to 3.0%) and learning disabilities (4.7% to 5.9%). The Advocate is calling on government to urgently address the issue of classroom composition and give teachers the tools and resources needed to focus on learning and pedagogy, and place classroom composition and teacher resources at the heart of all educational decisions.
- Undertake research to identify at-risk groups in order to address specific needs of children with unique literacy challenges.
- Ensure the tools necessary for early detection and assessment of learning and behavioural challenges in the transition-to-kindergarten phase, including specific resources to address behavioural issues and challenges.
- Address family literacy and provide community resources to families to support early curiosity and reading, including expanded use of family resource centres and social pediatrics in addressing parental capacity to facilitate learning.

### **Challenge #2: Mental Health**

The Advocate has already made youth mental health a priority issue by making **The Best We Have To Offer** the first report ever to receive regular recommendation monitoring by the Advocate’s office. In the first status update, the Advocate praised government for increased rates of funding and the addition of additional emergency room supports but urged government to provide more preventative resources and clarify the plans for expansion of pilot projects. The main theme of these recommendations was that mental health now requires a system that offers primary care and consistent crisis response in the same way that physical health care systems provide those services. The indicators suggest an urgency that is growing by the day.

Today, young people are experiencing more stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions than any generation before. The growth of mental health needs is outpacing our collective capacity to respond. In particular, adolescents are losing their sense of safety, security and stability. It is striking to note that adolescence is correlated with a significant drop in these feelings. In 2018-19, 92% of students felt safe at school in grades 4 and 5, yet in upper grades only 76% of students felt the same. The growth of mental health needs may be a cause of this or it may be a result, but it is clear that the demand is outstripping the supply of service.

**Percentage of students reporting the following:**

<i>Consulted a health professional about emotional or mental health</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 13% (2012) to 17.4%
<i>Reported sleeping 8 hours a night</i>	<b>DECREASED</b> 36.5% (2018-19) to 30.2% (2021-22)
<i>Reported symptoms of depression in last 12 months</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 37.6% (2018-19) to 41.7% (2021-22)
<i>Reported symptoms of anxiety in last 12 months</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 37.7% (2018-19) to 47.8% (2021-22)
<i>Reported receiving a diagnosis for a mental health disability</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 6.1% (2018-19) to 18.0% (2021-22)

**Incidents per 10,000 children under 19**

<i>Were admitted to hospital with a stress reaction or adjustment disorder</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 8.1 (2020-21) to 9.0 (2021-22)
<i>Were admitted to hospital with anxiety disorder</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 3.3 (2020-21) to 5.5 (2021-22)
<i>Were admitted to hospital with an eating disorder</i>	<b>INCREASED</b> 1.5 (2020-21) to 1.6 (2021-22)
<i>Were admitted to hospital with a schizophrenic/delusional disorder</i>	<b>STABLE</b> at 1.3

The good news is that this generation is being much kinder to each other. Incidents of bullying, verbal harassment and cyberbullying are all down significantly. However, their access to helping adults is down, and that is concerning. Statistically significant decreases were seen in children reporting access to a family doctor and children feeling they can trust the adults around them. The number of young people reporting that they do not know where to turn for help remains over 75%.

The Advocate will challenge leaders to address this expansion of mental health concerns in a number of ways, including:

- Better defining the services available between prevention and crisis and ensuring a level of accessible primary care for mental health issues.
- Ensuring a credible plan to train scarce health professionals such as psychologists.
- Undertake research into the root causes of the increase in mental health caseloads among young people.
- Partner with municipalities to create child-friendly communities with social and recreational spaces that allow children to interact beyond on-line activities.

### Challenge #3: Civics Education

The data is showing that this generation of young people are engaged, compassionate and desirous of becoming citizens. They express interest in voting, in pursuing post-secondary education and volunteering at record high levels. They are compassionate to each other and embracing of diversity like to generation before.

However, there are reasons to question whether or not we are adequately preparing them to turn that engagement into the knowledge of how to create change and shape the world around them as young adults. This generation is dealing with more information bombardment than ever before. The ability to process information, thoughtfully evaluate credible sources of information, logically process and defend arguments, strategically question or ignore false information and to navigate complex institutions are skills more necessary than ever before.

Yet New Brunswick children do not receive instruction in our social and governing institutions until late in their school career. Seminal events that explain our institutions, such as the Holocaust, are given short shrift compared to more esoteric historical topics such as the Industrial Revolution. Specialization in teaching history and civics among teachers is declining and these vital topics are often lumped in with myriad other “non-core” topics. Our Social Studies curricula often emanate from core documents that predate the online and social media explosions.

The Advocate will challenge leaders to:

- Revitalize civics education from a citizenship lens, exposing children early to logic, researching and democratic problem-solving skills.
- Place important topics such as diversity and human rights within the historical and social context that explains our democratic institutions and how they work.
- Encourage active citizenship through school community engagement, entrepreneurial learning and volunteer education.