



The Time to Act is Now: Nova Scotia Needs a Provincial Autism Strategy

Submitted by: Cynthia Carroll, Executive Director, Autism Nova Scotia

April 28, 2023

After decades of tireless advocacy, and repeated promises appearing in multiple partisan election platforms, the Canadian government is on track to introduce a National Autism Strategy for Fall 2023.

The anticipation of a tangible Strategy has brought renewed hope to a population that has spent years waiting to be recognized and fully supported across our country; a hope that has burned even brighter following the unanimous passing of **Bill S-203, “An Act respecting a federal framework on autism spectrum disorder,”** which received Royal Assent on March 30, 2023 in the House of Commons.

The rollout of a National Autism Strategy holds incredible potential for Nova Scotia to establish itself as a national leader related to this complex issue affecting people across the lifespan. As the provincial organization representing the autism community, Autism Nova Scotia is ready and willing to work alongside the provincial government to make a provincial strategy a reality.

There should be no doubt that a formalized and cross-sectoral approach is needed in our province. Current prevalence rates with population statistics in Nova Scotia indicate Autistic individuals and their immediate families represent 10% of Nova Scotia’s current population – leading to increased pressure on government services and systems that present risks around equitable, accessible, and sustainable access to supports and services at all ages. Perhaps more startling is Nova Scotia is home to the highest autism prevalence rates among five-year-olds in the country, and yet, we are the only Atlantic province without a formal autism strategy.

This lack of a framework has the potential to place us at a significant disadvantage to negotiate with the federal government when discussions with First Ministers finally take place.

In 2018, the Commission on Inclusive Education recommended the development of a Provincial Autism Strategy in the **Students First Report**. This report reinforced previous calls for a provincial strategy in the 2010 **Autism Management Advisory Team (AMAT) Report** and Autism Nova Scotia’s 2016 **Choosing Now Report**.

The evidence and need is clear, it’s well past time for Nova Scotia to put a strategic plan in place – not a policy document that sits forgotten on a shelf, the community has seen enough of those over the years; rather, it must serve as the foundation of support for Autistic individuals, from toddlers to adults, and a safety net to ensure no one falls through the cracks.

A provincial strategy would transform guess work and uncertainty into a concrete support plan. True inclusivity requires formal policy that considers and accounts for the needs of all Nova Scotians.

The crucial first step in creating a Provincial Autism Strategy is for the provincial government to develop a strong, cross-departmental team to lead the way. Once created, this team can begin gathering data from the community, starting with first-voice Autistic individuals and families.

This step is essential; the research we support and the policy recommendations we package for the public will be of no use if we do not continue to expand our reach to include real and meaningful input from Autistic self-advocates as well as from those supporting individuals who cannot speak for themselves. It is critical that we hold ourselves to the highest standard when it comes to listening to and amplifying Autistic voices. It is a standard that we have fallen short of in recent years, and a standard we are committed to upholding in the days, months, and years ahead.

This data can then be used to develop a roadmap that ensures policies across government departments are inclusive of Autistic individuals and their families, while identifying any remaining gaps.

It is our sincere hope that the provincial government will recognize the opportunity of a federal strategy and take immediate action to help ensure Autistic Nova Scotians and their families are receiving the support they deserve and so desperately need.

It's time to move from the good intentions of the past to fully realizing the promise of doing better for Autistic Nova Scotians of all ages, and the people who love and support them.

It's time for an Autism Strategy for Nova Scotia.

Resources:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/autism-spectrum-disorder-asd/national-strategy.html>

<https://www.autismnovascotia.ca>

Contact:

media@autismns.ca