

ACCOMMODATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE INCLUSION CRISIS AT YARMOUTH CONSOLIDATED MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL (YCMHS)

We are Agenda Gap, a student-led group of empowered youth who focus on bridging the gap between communal and individual issues by promoting education on mental health and accommodations, and by sharing our experiences involving our education system.

The policies for accommodation resources at YCMHS are not well understood and are not being properly or fairly applied.

Students, teachers, substitute teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators lack clarity on both how to access and provide access to resources. While the resources exist, the pathways to access them are not made readily available or executed in a consistently helpful fashion. This situation is made worse by the absence of a point person with a strong understanding of the existing policies, and by an overall lack of communication and transparency regarding accommodations.

It is vital that resource access is provided through accurate application of policy, and attends to the intersectional needs of all students across spectrums of gender, sexuality, race, and other attributes.

This document reflects the lived experiences of students at YCMHS, including those with accommodation needs. It presents calls to action to improve our school experience, and to meet the goals of the Inclusive Education Strategy.

HOW THIS PROBLEM IS AFFECTING STUDENTS

Unclear or poorly applied accommodation policies have serious repercussions on student wellbeing. Students often experience stigma as a result of how they are identified with regards to their accommodation needs, or when burdened with the need to re-explain their accommodation requirements to teachers and administrators. When students are unable to access resources, whether through a lack of information or being denied access, this leads to higher stress levels, worsened mental health, and less school and academic engagement. Failing to inform students and families about available resources, as well as ignoring or improperly applying these resources, contributes to inequity in the school environment.



STUDENT TESTIMONIES

Students often encounter issues when trying to gain access to resources such as access to the guidance room, the sensory room and other spaces, or use of assistive technology such as headphones, as students often receive conflicting information on the requirements for requesting access to resources, or have their requests or documented needs ignored. As articulated by students, relationships with teachers and administrators are difficult to navigate when trying to gain access to these resources.

The ongoing negative social and academic effects of the current state of accommodation resources demonstrates a clear need for new avenues of communication and access. Students have noted receiving troubling replies by adults in the school environment following their request for resources, such as “neurodivergence isn't a thing” or “you’re smart, you shouldn’t have a problem doing this”. When providing instructors with documented need for assistive technology youth report simply being told they can’t use them without further explanation.

Students describe bewilderment when providing adults with documentation for accommodation needs, such as medical descriptions and diagnoses, only to have them not properly documented or read by the adults they go to for help. In several cases students have noted having resources taken away in the middle of critical learning, such as assistive technology being removed mid-exam, or in situations of intense stress, such as being removed from the resource room mid-panic attack without an adult providing crisis alternatives.

Most troubling, students have expressed worry when they exhibit visible signs of sensory overload or the onset of a panic attack, that adults in school often do not know what to do and sometimes ignore the situation or intervene inappropriately (i.e., by touching or rough handling without consent). Disregard for the documented accommodation requirements of students diminishes student confidence, sense of belonging and safety in the classroom.

POINTING TOWARDS POLICY

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY:

This policy document clearly outlines Nova Scotia’s commitment to high-quality and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. It includes several guiding principles, such as:

- 4.5 Every student deserves to belong (affirmed, validated, and nurtured), be safe, and feel welcomed in all aspects of their daily experience.
- 4.8 All partners are committed and empowered to work collectively to identify and eliminate barriers that interfere with students’ well-being and achievement.
- 5.4 Every school will establish a Teaching Support Team that will meet frequently to address immediate issues facing teachers and quickly identify resources, people, and strategies that can help those teachers more effectively support their students.

JOINT ACCESSIBILITY PLAN

This document outlines Nova Scotia’s plan to “provide accessible learning and teaching experiences for all, in every aspect of education”. This plan, in alignment with the Nova Scotia’s Inclusive Education Policy, includes a commitment to creating accessible education in Nova Scotia by 2030.

CALLS TO ACTION

In response to the ongoing difficulties students are experiencing in accessing accommodation resources, and to improve communication between students, teachers, administrators and families, we put forward the following calls to action:

- 1 Further training should be provided to all administrators and teachers on equitably granting access to resources. This material should be updated as necessary to reflect active policies and protocols, and those undertaking this education should officially confirm their completion and understanding of the material.
- 2 Resources, policies and protocols should be better introduced to all students and their families on an ongoing basis, and there should be opportunities for direct communication between students and teachers on available resources.
- 3 Teachers and administrators who enact resources should be introduced and connected to students early at the start of each new semester, so students know the appropriate person to go to with accommodation questions.
- 4 When adults in the school environment are faced with accommodation situations they are not equipped or comfortable addressing, they should find an alternative trusted adult to assist. Students should never be left mid-crisis.
- 5 Protocols for accessing resources such as the guidance room, should be public posted in an accessible space so that these guidelines can be better understood by students, teacher and administrators.
- 6 Policies and protocols around accommodation resources must be consistently applied by all school staff in all school spaces. Discriminately applying or altering the policies and protocols should only occur with prior approval and notification.
- 7 Non-punitive, non-physical approaches to dealing with mental health and behaviour issues should be used as a first approach. Physical intervention methods should only be used as a last resort and with given student consent, if appropriate for the situation.
- 8 Students, teachers and administrators in the school community should work collaboratively to de-stigmatize accommodation allowances, and respond to student needs in a fashion that fosters an inclusive and welcoming learning environment.