



## CAOT Column

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### Enabling the WORKability of Canadians

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) is honoured to have a dedicated column in *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*. In this column, CAOT invites occupational therapists to share their experiences on enabling the workability of Canadian citizens. Through this international exchange of ideas we hope that readers will gain further insights into the complexity of work practice.

For further information contact Janet Craik, at [jcraik@caot.ca](mailto:jcraik@caot.ca)

*Janet M. Craik, M.Sc., OT (C), OT RegNB*  
Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists  
Professional Education Manager

### Early intervention program for teachers: An occupational therapy program

Teaching can be a very rewarding and satisfying career. It can also be very demanding on teachers, both physically and mentally. Daily stressors at home or school can sometimes become too much or maybe an injury or illness has limited the teacher functionally in their daily routine. In working with teachers through the Early Intervention Program for Teachers, it has become apparent that a lot of teachers devote their time and energy to the wellbeing of their students, colleagues, family, friends and other important people in their lives. Less effort is often spent on taking care of themselves. Sometimes this is realized too late, the teacher may not know which way to turn to manage their wellbeing and health issues may become overwhelming.

The Early Intervention Program for Teachers (EIP) is a voluntary, supportive service available through the Nova Scotia Teachers Union (NSTU) for teachers experiencing illness or injury. It is a program developed and implemented by Occupational Therapists to enable teachers who are at work or on sick leave to manage

their health and facilitate return to work plans. The program also helps teachers who are still at work recognize their difficulties before their health suffers to the extent that they must stop working.

An unexpected illness or injury can turn lives upside-down and sometimes it is difficult to know what path is best or even what options might be available. For instance, a back injury may not only limit the teacher's ability to teach, but may also influence their independence at home, and time away from work may lead to feelings of isolation and even depression. On the other hand, various stressors in a teacher's life may also become overwhelming and effect their ability to cope with classroom demands and negatively impact their relationships at work or at home. Financial strain may also arise if a teacher's sick leave expires before they are ready to return to work. These issues are more common than most people would like to believe and the EIP is available to provide encouragement and support for teachers experiencing such difficulties. The EIP works collaboratively with teachers to encourage their active involvement in the intervention process. Additional support through this program can also include various case management interventions such as communication with physicians, treatment providers and employers, in order to coordinate medical or rehabilitative services as well as to facilitate suitable return to work programs or timely application for disability benefits if return to work is not feasible. Occupational Therapy intervention with ergonomics, organization of space as well as time and stress management are also common needs amongst teachers.

NSTU is taking a proactive role by investing in this program to help minimize the effect of illness or injury on a teacher's health, career and other areas of his or her life. The Early Intervention Program Manager, Jennifer Finlayson and EIP Case Coordinators, Leticia White and Maya Fallows are all trained, licensed occupational therapists and currently make up the EIP staff.

*Jennifer Finlayson, O.T. Reg. (NS)*  
EIP Manager