



## Living SJ Op Ed

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# Living SJ strategy seeks to end child poverty

*Jack Keir, Paulette Hicks and Tom Gribbons Commentary*

In response to the Oct.31 editorial titled 'Saint John needs a united response to poverty', Saint John is organized to end child poverty. Living SJ is the strategy. Living SJ was built in 2014 from extensive community consultation and from a 15-year 'poverty reduction' movement that has helped to reduce our city's overall poverty rate from 27 to 20 per cent.

Saint John has learned a lot about how to reduce poverty. Our high child poverty rate, when compared to other cities in New Brunswick, is caused by generational poverty. The road to breaking the cycle is complex but simply put, our success lies in each child and family knowing they are important to our city's future, that their talents are needed and that our community cares and is fully equipped to help them achieve their education and economic self-sufficiency. Our end goal: no child ever again will suffer a lifetime of poverty.

The Living SJ strategy is led by determined and seasoned leaders, drawn from business, government, community and low income neighbourhoods. The strategy involves a cast of thousands who are helping to end generational poverty in Saint John.

The Living SJ approach, called collective impact, is grounded in solid research. It is used by cities around the world to solve complex issues. It is a structured form of coordinating efforts across different sectors, rather than relying on the isolated interventions of individual organizations. The idea is to collaborate and focus our resources on actions that matter the most and that have the greatest impact and return on investment ([collectiveimpactforum.org](http://collectiveimpactforum.org)).

Education, from cradle to career, is the foundational plank that has brought together Saint John's orchestra of organizations, their staff and volunteers, to help children and families succeed. Our progress is continuous and the results multiply as we collectively learn how to work better together.

These are Living SJ's education priorities:

-- **Provide high quality early childhood education for children and their parents.** The YMCA Early Learning Centre at St. John the Baptist-King Edward School is the first of its kind that serves a neighbourhood and integrates services. The Family Resource Centre, Anglophone School District – South, FACE (Family and Child

Education) and Horizon Health are helping our city develop essential and attractive learning programs for parents and children. The scientific and economic evidence behind investing in early childhood education is astounding.

-- **Ensure every child is able to read before they enter Grade 3.** After one year of re-aligned effort, the Grade 2 literacy scores in our inner city schools are showing substantial improvements. In fact, they now match district and provincial averages. The school staff and their community partners are proving to be true pioneers of change and are known as Achieve Literacy GSJ. Today 79 per cent of all Grade 2 students within the school district achieve government literacy standards. The Living SJ goal is 90 per cent, by 2017.

-- **Enrich the educational experiences for children, in school and out of school, 12 months of the year.** Schools, together with their community and neighbourhood partners are helping to strengthen the resources a family needs. The kingpins of this strategy have been the community schools and their PALS (Partners Assisting Local Schools) who provide nutritious breakfasts and lunches, tutors and mentors, improve school amenities and offer awesome in-school experiences and adventures outside of school. Our community schools are also joined with quality after-school programs such as Sistema, Elementary Literacy Friends (ELF), the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, Big Brothers-Big Sisters, and Bee Me Kidz.

-- **Expect and support every teenager to graduate from high school.** All Saint John high schools are re-working the ways and means to help struggling students build confidence and determination to stay in school, work hard and graduate. Yes, attendance matters! And our high schools are working with community partners and employers to help students further their education, training and readiness for employment. Community partners include the Teen Resource Centre, UNBSJ Promise Partnership, First Steps and PALS En Route to Success. Today 70 per cent of our high school students graduate within the prescribed four years. Living SJ's goal is 90 per cent by 2020.

-- **Help at-risk adults find their path to employment.** The Saint John Learning Exchange, the Community Loan Fund, Women's Empowerment Network, NB Community College, NB Social Development, NB Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour and Enterprise SJ are some of our city's innovative leaders who are demonstrating solid ways for adults (who lack basic education and employment experience) to build essential skills, overcome obstacles to employment and enter the workforce.

Living SJ has two more important strategies that wrap around education to improve wellbeing:

-- **Revitalize low income neighbourhoods.** Thank you to all the contributors who are supporting the vital work of our neighbourhood leaders: ONE Change in the old north end, Crescent Valley, PULSE in the south end, Waterloo Village and West Side PACT. You strengthen our hope and conviction that within a generation, there will be no more low income neighbourhoods in Saint John. Our neighbourhood leaders are Living SJ's most important teachers.

-- **Improve the health & wellness of families.** Horizon Health is building collaborative teams of government and community services to serve families in low income neighbourhoods in new ways to improve child health, reduce chronic conditions, improve mental health and prevent addictions. Just imagine the long term impact on families and also the cost savings!

The successes we are seeing leave no doubt that Living SJ can break the poverty cycle. It will take time for our community, working in concert with senior governments, to strengthen policies and practices to drive the child poverty needle downwards but the plan is well underway and the economic and social benefits of this local work are already proven.

Living SJ is about a whole community collaborating to tackle the essential social changes that lead to economic gain. Working together, Greater Saint John is aiming high and forging ahead to its preferred future.

Thank you to all who are part of the Living SJ strategy. If you are on the outside looking in, please join in; we all will benefit.

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