

# Making a difference drives rapid expansion

Danielle Pelletier remembers working with her first child with autism nearly two decades ago – a four-year-old boy who struggled to communicate.

Little did the speech pathologist know this encounter would lead her to launch a company – one that is experiencing rapid growth in New Brunswick.

Autism Intervention Services (AIS), a company Pelletier founded in 2006, was awarded a contract in December to deliver the province’s enhanced preschool autism intervention program. From a single office in the provincial capital with 90 employees, the company expanded to eight more offices across the province and 375 full-time employees in a two-month time frame.

“It was a lot of work to set up the offices, to hire staff, to train staff and recognize what our needs are in each region,” she says. “But what inspires me is that I know we can really help kids develop and help their families. The motivation to help was the whole reason I started the company.”

## Motivated to help

Pelletier’s encounter with her first client with autism inspired her to learn more about the disorder and how she could help. She went on to work with children with autism for 10 years at the Stan Cassidy Centre for Rehabilitation in Fredericton before deciding to start her own company that would offer intervention services



in the community. From the basement of her Fredericton home, she launched AIS with one employee. Within two years, it grew to 90 employees as she took on more preschool clients.

“I was doing what I loved to do, and it ended up being a business,” she says. “I feel this landed in my lap and I ran with it.”

In 2011, she hired a Minnesota-based psychologist, Dr. Eric Larsson, an expert in autism and early intervention. She adapted his methods and concepts, including working with autistic children in their natural setting (homes or daycares).

# Making a difference – continued

“It’s really improved the quality of our services. Dr. Larsson has helped us build our program to a position of excellence that it is now nationally recognized; we are known as an agency that provides a high level of services to the clientele.”

Pelletier said she would not have pursued the provincial contract if not for her participation in the Wallace McCain Institute’s Entrepreneurial Leaders Program (ELP). There, she gained confidence in her leadership abilities and learned to surround herself with talented people.

Before accepting the contract, she met with key employees to ensure they were onboard. They all took on a region of the province, each with its own specific needs. She also created a human resource team, an IT team and an accounting team to help with the sudden growth.

The rapid expansion hasn’t been easy. The change in service was challenging for some New Brunswick families and former service providers. Hiring and training new staff was also demanding.

“Change in general is very challenging for people,” she says. “That is where I’ve had to put a lot of energy in helping families and employees understand where we are heading, our mission and where we want to go.”

“I find a lot of the clients are very happy, thankful and appreciative of the service,” she adds. “It has been hard work but very positive so far.”

## Danielle Pelletier’s lessons learned

- Change can be challenging and change can be positive
- Organizations need to adapt to the specific needs of clients and communities you service
- Real value in hiring staff with experience
- Invest in yourself
- Invest in quality systems now
- Continually adapt and improve your product over time
- Always stay current
- Train all staff to the same level; make sure they meet the needs of clients
- High levels of energy needed to scale
- Be careful what you wish for
- Hiring good detailed people will help ensure top quality results
- Continuously learn



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