

A Parent's Role in Special Education Planning

Note: The language used for this paper is complicated. Special education is sometimes referred to as inclusive education. Students who have diagnosed needs and require unique support services are sometimes referred to as students who have exceptionalities, students with special learning needs, students who have support needs, and students with disabilities and diverse abilities. The terms differ between systems and they are changing over time.

Family support is key to the success of all students. All schools and students benefit from family involvement – and parental and family input is especially valuable when planning interventions to assist students who have special education needs.

Families have knowledge, observations, and experiences that are vital for understanding students. Often, parents are most aware of their child's strengths and challenges. That information is very important in deciding whether a student might have a special learning need and, if so, what can be done to help.

- ▶ You should be provided full information about your child's education program so that you feel able to make good decisions.
- ▶ You have a right to be involved in all decisions about your child's learning.
- ▶ You should be involved in the design of your child's learning plan. You can help identify the best responses to your child's unique needs.
- ▶ You and school staff should work together to make sure that strategies used to support your child at school and at home are complementary. Consistency is crucial for the success of children and teens who have special education needs.

Who Supports Students Who Have Special Learning Needs?

Many types of professionals and resource people may be involved in supporting a student who has special needs. Depending on what each student needs, some of the following people may be asked to help.

- ▶ **Principals:** make sure that school staff receive the direction, information, and supports needed to ensure that all students are included and successful in school. Principals are

responsible for organizing relevant professional development for staff, and they advocate for necessary resources.

- ▶ **Classroom Teachers:** observe students regularly, so they can help identify the need for an assessment and implement strategies that build on students' strengths to help them succeed. Teachers are responsible for creating respectful classrooms that reflect the message that everyone belongs. If teachers don't know how to help a child, they must ask for appropriate assistance.
- ▶ **Learning Assistant Teachers or Resource Teachers:** may be employed in some schools to help classroom teachers. They may suggest strategies to support students, provide services to students, coordinate teams of professionals, and help the school set up structures to make sure all students can learn and develop to their full potential.
- ▶ **Education Assistants (EAs):** work with teachers to help students. They may work in a specific classroom, possibly with one child or with more children in groups. EAs are directed and supervised by the teacher or principal and they may help with personal care, learning activities, therapy programs designed by therapists, social interactions among students, and other activities.
- ▶ **Doctors:** can identify physical and mental health issues that might interfere with learning, and also recommend further medical testing and possible strategies that will help.
- ▶ **First Nations Education Directors, Coordinators and Family Resource Workers:** may help parents review relevant information, consult with professionals, and arrange appointments.
- ▶ **Education psychologists:** assess students' development in order to identify their strengths and any challenges that need to be addressed.
- ▶ **Psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers:** can help identify resources and ways to support children, teens, and their families.
- ▶ **Audiologists:** can test whether and how students hear different sounds, which impacts their learning.
- ▶ **Physical therapists:** diagnose and help promote healthy movement.
- ▶ **Occupational therapists:** help students with daily living and self-care skills.
- ▶ **Optometrists:** test and help strengthen students' vision.
- ▶ **Speech language therapists:** help build students' listening, speaking, and communication skills.

It may be overwhelming keeping track of all of the people who will be working with your child. But over time their roles will become clear and you can feel good knowing so many people are committed to helping your family.

More About the Role of Education Assistants (EAs)

EAs are critical for the success of students with exceptionalities. They can help convey the message that everyone belongs. Parents often report that the commitment and skills of EAs are key to their child's progress in school.

Given their importance, you may want to ask your principal the following questions if an EA is assigned to work with your child.

- ▶ How much time is an EA going to be spending with my child?
- ▶ How will the EA be supported so they have the specific skills needed to work with my child?
- ▶ How is the EA assigned to students / classrooms?
- ▶ Will union seniority affect the placement of the EA (for students attending a public school)?
- ▶ What happens when the EA gets sick? How will an appropriate substitute be arranged?

It may also be useful for you and the school to discuss and monitor the relationship of your child and the EA.

- ▶ EAs can be invaluable in helping your child. However, if an EA is overly attached to your child, it may be more difficult for your child to build their independence skills and learn to interact with others on their own.
- ▶ Parents and school staff can discuss how to balance your child's need for adequate supervision and safety, with opportunities for them to try things on their own or with help from their peers.

Who Identifies Children's Special Learning Needs?

- ▶ **Sometimes children are identified as having special needs before they enter school, perhaps by their parents, their doctor, or by daycare or pre-school workers.**
 - Early identification of a child's special needs can be very beneficial.
 - If you have concerns while your children are young, do not hesitate to reach out for help.
- ▶ **Once a child is in school, parents and/or teachers usually identify students' special learning needs.**
 - If you have questions or concerns about your child's achievement in school, reach out to their teacher.
 - All students are assessed regularly to determine whether they are performing at grade level. If your child's testing results concern you, raise the issue with school staff.

- ▶ Teachers or education assistants, based on their observations and/or student assessment results, may suspect that a child or teen might have exceptionalities. In that case, the school may suggest further investigation to find out for sure.
 - If school staff reach out to talk to you about your child's needs, try to listen calmly and thoughtfully. They are trying to help your child.
 - No one is to blame if a child has special learning needs. All that matters is combining efforts to make sure every child is successful.

Regardless of who first raises the possibility that a student might benefit from additional supports, you should be asked to provide your approval before any formal assessment of your child takes place. You should also be involved in planning any related follow-up

And remember that just being behind grade level does not mean that your child necessarily has a special learning need. Other factors may be impacting your child's learning. The school should discuss this with you if you have concerns.

Assessing and Identifying Learning Needs

It's important to identify a student's learning needs to ensure the right strategies and supports are put in place. The following information might be helpful.

- ▶ Early identification can be helpful to prevent challenges from growing, but some assessments are not always appropriate for primary students. Talk to your child's school about this issue.
- ▶ Assessments may be performed by different types of professionals.
- ▶ All assessment and diagnoses should lead to better learning opportunities for your child. *However, having a diagnosis is not needed for a student to receive supports. Your child has a right to receive all of the supports and services they need whether or not they have a formal diagnosis of a disability or exceptionality.*
- ▶ There may be a wait time before an assessment can be completed for your child. Talk to the school about why there might be a wait and what services your child will receive in the meantime.
- ▶ Assessments may need to be updated at various times throughout the student's K-12 education.
- ▶ School personnel should always consult and inform parents about assessments they feel are needed. Formal assessments need your written consent.

- ▶ Sometimes only you will know that your child has had a bad night or a medication change that may impact assessment results. It is in your child's best interests that you are informed of any assessments to be performed so you can provide important input.

Questions to ask about assessments

- ▶ What do you hope to find out from this assessment?
- ▶ Why is this assessment being done?
- ▶ Is previous information available about my child's strengths, learning style and needs?
- ▶ How is the assessment done? Has my child been told what to expect? Are they comfortable with the process?
- ▶ How long will it take to receive the results?
- ▶ Will I get a copy of the assessment report? Will I be asked to give approval before the report is shared with anyone? The answer to each of these questions should be yes!
- ▶ Can I speak to the assessor so that I can understand the results?

As a parent, you may have concerns about how well your child knows the person who will be doing the assessment. Unfamiliar situations and people can be overwhelming. You may wonder how well your child will do if the assessor is a stranger. You may also have concerns about when and where an assessment will take place.

You have the right to ask questions so you feel comfortable with the assessment process.

After an assessment, you should get a summarized report of the results. This report will be shared with others, including the school-based team and, as appropriate, the student.

- ▶ You must be informed about how the report will be made accessible to other people who will be working with your child.
- ▶ Ask to speak with the assessor if you need further information or help to interpret the results. It is your right to ask questions until you feel you fully understand the assessment results and what they mean for your child.

Working With Teams Who Support Your Child

Students who have unique learning needs often have a team of people who come together to support them in achieving their goals.

- ▶ Students can be involved on such teams in age-appropriate ways.
- ▶ You also have invaluable information about your child to bring to the teams. Do not underestimate your own knowledge and contributions.
- ▶ Many other people may bring important skills and knowledge to help your child, as well.

Different Types of Teams

Schools may use a variety of specific names for the groups of people who come together to help students with exceptionalities. The specific people involved in the teams may also vary.

The following types of teams may exist to help your child.

You have the right to ask the school about what teams are supporting your child and how you can be involved with them.

An “educational team”:

- ▶ Includes all the people who work together to help children succeed in school
- ▶ May include teachers, EAs, therapists, medical professionals, counsellors, social workers, Indigenous workers, consultants, child care consultants, etc.

A “school-based team”:

- ▶ Differs from an educational team
- ▶ Is a small group of school-based personnel that has a formal role and comes together regularly as a problem-solving unit to address a child's specific needs
- ▶ Includes teachers, the school principal, and other professionals (e.g., counsellors, psychologists, speech and language psychologists) who come together to discuss how to support students and the classroom teacher
- ▶ Parents and the student, as appropriate, and representatives from community service agencies may also be involved

If your child has a school-based team, you should be informed and you should provide consent for their learning program. School-based teams are most successful when parents are included as partners.

If you learn that your child has a school-based team, you may want to ask the principal or teacher the following questions:

- ▶ Who are the members of this team?
- ▶ What is their role?
- ▶ What types of assistance does each member provide?
- ▶ How will I be involved in the school-based team process?
- ▶ How will I be informed of planning meetings?
- ▶ How often does this team meet?

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) team:

- ▶ Is a specific team set up to plan IEPs for children who need them
- ▶ IEPs are described more below

Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

If your child has been identified as having an exceptionality, the school should contact you to discuss the creation of an Individual Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student, based on a thorough assessment of the student's strengths and needs that affect the student's ability to learn and demonstrate learning.

- ▶ An IEP will be developed by a group of people who will combine their expertise for the benefit of your child. You will be an important member of that group. You have the most expertise about your child – what they do well, what is hard for them, what kinds of things they like to do most, etc.
- ▶ The IEP will outline any additions, changes, or adaptations to the regular school program that will help your child succeed – both within and outside of school.
- ▶ Parents must be consulted and should be involved in developing their child's IEP.
- ▶ Once written, the IEP will be the plan to help your child perform as well as possible in the classroom, and to transition smoothly from one setting to another or from one grade to another.

- ▶ The IEP will help you and the school monitor your child's progress and growth. It will provide an ongoing record of what services have been provided for your child.
- ▶ IEPs should be reviewed regularly throughout the school year and updated at scheduled reporting periods.
- ▶ Your child's goals will be outlined in the IEP. The goals should be based on reliable information about your child's strengths, skills, challenges and performance, all of which can evolve over time. This means each IEP will likely need ongoing changes to keep it relevant and up-to-date.
- ▶ Using the IEP, you and the school's staff can continue to combine your knowledge, experience, and commitment to work together in the best interests of your child.

Often when students have an IEP, a person is identified who coordinates the education services. This person is often referred to as an IEP Coordinator or Case Worker.

- ▶ You will want to develop a relationship with that person.
- ▶ You may want to ask the coordinator the following questions:
 - When and how often can we meet?
 - What is the best way to communicate?
 - How will I be notified of planning meetings?
 - How will I be involved?
 - Will my child be out of the regular class for any period of time. If so, why? How often?

Note: Some students who have an IEP may be placed on a modified program. A modified program may be appropriate for a few students with serious special needs, but it is not necessary for the majority of students who have an IEP.

- ▶ Modifications are changes made to instruction and assessment approaches that result in individualized learning goals and outcomes that are different from the regular learning outcomes of a course or subject.
- ▶ Students on a modified program will leave school with the School Completion Certificate, which is **not** a graduation certificate. This is a significant decision.
- ▶ If your child is going to be placed on a modified program, ask why. Make sure you fully understand the decision before you agree.
- ▶ If your child is on a modified program, remember that this does not always have to be a permanent or long term solution. The use of modifications can be reviewed to make sure you feel fully informed and comfortable with the decision.

- ▶ The critical decision of whether a student's education program should include modifications should be made carefully and thoughtfully, in consultation with parents. It should consider each student's educational, career, and life goals and plans.

OTHER RESOURCES TO KNOW ABOUT

- ▶ **Inclusion BC** is a non-profit provincial organization that advocates for the rights and opportunities of people with intellectual disabilities and their families. Inclusion BC members include people with intellectual disabilities, their families, and organizations that serve them.

The Inclusion BC web site includes a free Parent's Handbook on Inclusive Education that provides a wealth of information for families. See <https://inclusionbc.org/resource-types/family-resource/>

Some of the information included in this section was borrowed from the Inclusion BC Handbook.

The Inclusion BC Handbook also includes an online template document for creating a one-page profile of your child. It can help you share a summary about your child at the beginning of every school year. Some parents find it helpful to create a one-page profile to introduce their child to new teachers. See https://inclusionbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-09_OnePageProfile_Sample.pdf

- ▶ **The Family Support Institute of BC** is a provincial society committed to supporting families who have a family member with a disability. It is a grass roots family-to-family organization with a broad volunteer base. Its supports and services are FREE to any family.

The Family Support Institute has created MyBooklet BC – a FREE online tool that families and people with disabilities can use to create a beautiful and personalized information booklet for a loved one or for themselves.

To consider whether this resource would help you, consider the following questions.

- Are you tired of constantly repeating your “story” to doctors, teachers, therapists, friends and family?
- Do you wish all your important information was in one document?
- Do you wish you could share more than just the medical and diagnostic facts?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you'll want YOUR OWN myBooklet now!

It's as easy as 1-2-3 to create a booklet

1. Create a FREE user account.
2. Fill in the forms you want.
3. Print YOUR OWN myBooklet and share! Or if you don't have a printer, ask the school or your Band Office to print it for you.

See <https://mybookletbc.com>