

# **Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta**

## **Discussion Guide**

**Prepared by**

**The Alberta Disabilities Forum**

# Big Picture

## 1. Do you think that we have an effective approach to special education in Alberta?

No, for the reasons brought forward in this document.

## 2. How important do you think the following factors are in creating a successful framework for a new special education policy?

	SD	D	N	A	SA
Effective teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Comprehensive programming for students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prompt and accurate assessment of students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provision of support services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Categorizing of students using current coding criteria	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comprehensive data collection and data sharing in s.e.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Classroom environment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Funding distribution	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Schools that are welcoming and practice inclusion	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Meaningful monitoring of success in classrooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>

### 2.1. Other factors (please specify)

The members of the Alberta Disabilities Forum agree that schools should be welcoming and practise inclusion while ensuring the following factors are in place for every child in the school system:

### 1. Parental Choice

Parents of students with special needs must have an unequivocal right to choose an inclusive education. “Inclusion means full acceptance and accommodation of children with diverse abilities (that is, both giftedness and disabilities) in all aspects of schooling that other children are able to access and enjoy. It means that all children are able to attend ‘regular’ schools and classrooms which genuinely adapt and change to meet the needs of all children, as well as valuing and celebrating differences.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Inclusive Education: A Practical Guide To Supporting Diversity In The Classroom by David Harvey, Tim Loreman, Joanne Deppeler Softcover, Allen & Unwin, ISBN 1741144094 (1-74114-409-4)

There must be a corresponding responsibility on the part of the education system to readily provide a quality inclusive education irrespective of when that choice is made. Having made that choice, parents must be guaranteed that their choice will be honoured by teachers and schools.

Some members of the deaf community want the option of choosing congregated education at the School for the Deaf. They view sign language as their first language and want the option of having their children educated in this language and cultural context. For the parents of children who are deaf, hearing impaired or deaf-blind, who are increasingly choosing inclusion, access to appropriate interpreters to enable their participation and education in the regular classroom is necessary. There has been a decline in ASL-interpreters across the province, so this issue needs to be resolved in order to have deaf or hard-of-hearing children in regular classrooms with all supports available.

## **2. Inclusive education**

The regular classroom must remain as the first placement option for every student with special needs. For those students whose parents and educators agree cannot be currently accommodated in a regular classroom or for any portion of a regular class, there must be a plan implemented to accommodate the student's full inclusion or return him/her to the classroom.

The following excerpt is from the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* which was adopted by the United Nations by General Assembly on 20 November 1989.

### **Article 23<sup>2</sup>**

1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.
2. States Parties recognize the right of the disabled child to special care and shall encourage and ensure the extension, subject to available resources, to the eligible child and those responsible for his or her care, of assistance for which application is made and which is appropriate to the child's condition and to the circumstances of the parents or others caring for the child.
3. Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance extended in accordance with paragraph 2 of the present article shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, taking into account the financial resources of the parents or others caring for the child, and shall be designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development.

### **3. Learning Teams**

A team approach in supporting students with a fixed point of knowledgeable responsibility must be mandated. The effectiveness of these teams should be subject to evaluation.

### **4. Effective teaching**

Policy should mandate that all teachers in the regular classrooms be required to have the knowledge and skills to effectively teach students with special needs.

It should not be acceptable for a regular classroom teacher to claim that she or he is not able to effectively teach students in her or his classroom when there are one or more students with special needs in the classroom.

The knowledge to teach children in the regular classroom is available through professional development opportunities. It must be a required professional ethic of the teaching profession that each teacher and her or his corresponding professional bodies, including the Alberta government and school districts, ensure that every teacher is able to effectively teach students with special needs in the regular classroom.

Alberta Education should ensure the following elements are in place in the education system:

- Include a training mandate for educators. All teachers should have regular and ongoing professional development regarding inclusive education and differentiated instruction.
- Provide timely and appropriate assessment for children identified by family or professionals as experiencing, or being at risk of learning difficulties.
- Ensure that students receive what they need to reach their educational potential. This would include professionally qualified educational support for all children, including children with significant disabilities.
- Recommend to Advanced Education that all teacher training programs use an integrated model with each course taught being based on inclusive practices so that all education students learn how to teach and accommodate all learners.

### **5. Meaningful monitoring of success in classrooms**

Monitoring student learning and academic success are important practices that

need to occur on an ongoing basis. This requires monitoring not only of student progress but also the progress of teachers in being effective with their teaching skills and methods.

To date there is no research supporting the value of Individual Program Plans (IPPs). IPPs are outdated and are not effective tools for developing and monitoring learning outcomes.

Even though IPPs are mandated in Alberta, teachers are not given enough time and training to adequately develop and produce them. Valuable time is spent on developing IPPs that should be spent with students.

## **6. Comprehensive programming for students**

If comprehensive programming means that the education of all students with special needs is based on access to the regular curriculum and that both instruction and regular curriculum is modified or adapted to meet the educational needs of students with special needs, then this policy factor is important. However, if by comprehensive it means students with special needs are to be denied access to the regular curriculum (e.g. by using a curriculum that focuses on "life skills") then the Alberta Disabilities Forum would strongly disagree.

## **7. Prompt and accurate assessment of students**

If an assessment is for purposes of categorization and placement, then we strongly disagree. We would argue that assessment for purposes of categorization or labelling is detrimental to the interests of students to say nothing of wasting valuable resources that could better be used to educate students with special needs. Further, there is no research or scientific basis that links categorical assessments with educational placements. If, however, assessment refers to determining teaching strategies and learning outcomes, then appropriate assessment procedures are required.

## **8. Provision of support services**

Teachers, parents, students, and schools must have access to support services and consulting supports that will allow guidance in developing inclusive education. Teacher assistants must meet established minimum educational requirements of no less than a college diploma with knowledge of how to facilitate and support inclusion. There must be ongoing professional development for teaching assistants.

There must be increased utilization by teachers of peer mediated learning strategies. "Rather than being teacher-directed, peer-mediated learning arrangements provide students with the opportunities to work in groups to formulate and pose questions; share ideas; clarify thoughts; and experiment,

brainstorm, and present solutions with peers.”<sup>3</sup>

Students must receive qualified assistants according to their individual needs. Currently assistants are not required to have any professional qualifications. Teacher assistants must receive decent pay, education, and ongoing professional development.

## **9. Categorizing of students using current coding criteria**

Many districts categorize students according to current coding criteria and allocate resources according to these codes, as opposed to allocating resources according to individual student needs. Further, many districts assume they are only required to provide resources to students according to the funding attached to the code.

There is a current practice of some schools or school districts reporting categorically on the abilities of a student’s learning ability. For example, the schools indicate on the report cards of grade 11 students who have developmental disabilities, that their curriculum is based on grade 3 which is cruel and detrimental to these students’ best interests.

## **10. Comprehensive data collection and data sharing in special education classroom environment**

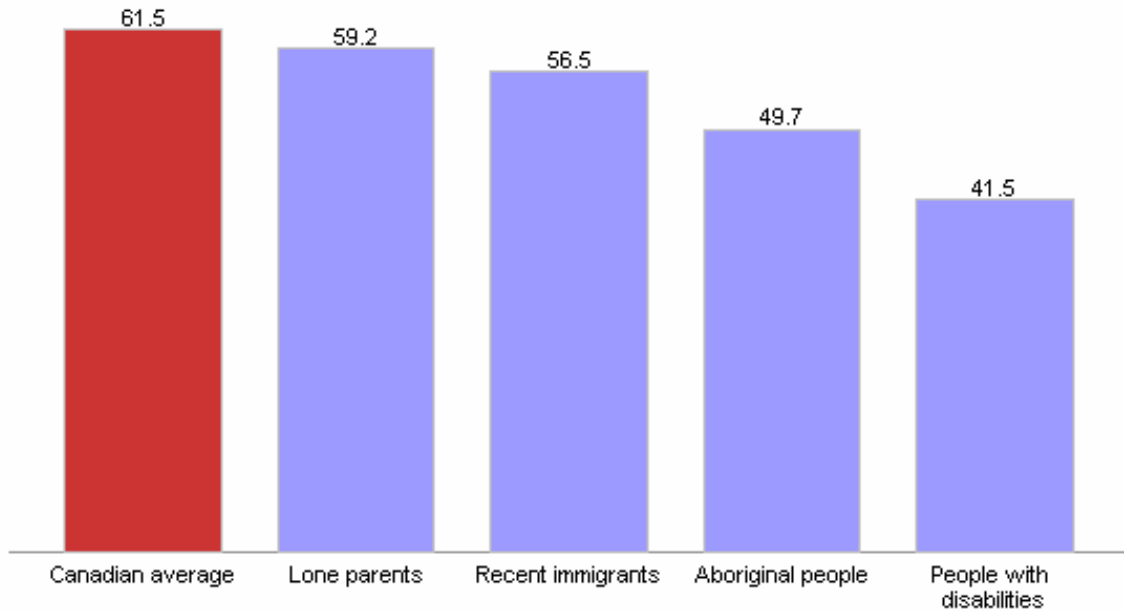
The Alberta Disabilities Forum members recommend authentic assessment of student learning related to the regular curriculum with modification and adaptation when necessary to meet the educational needs of students with special needs.

Reforms are data-driven and if there is no statistical information then there is no way to suggest or support changes. The federal government has several Human Resources and Social Development and Statistics Canada reports showing that people with disabilities have less employment opportunities and a higher unemployment rate. Issues like unemployment and poverty can be mitigated through education – education that supports each child to receive what he or she needs in order to succeed.

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<sup>3</sup> Lo, Jane, Grayson Wheatley, and Adelle Smith. “The Influence of Mathematics Class Discussion on the Beliefs and Arithmetic Meaning of a Third Grade Student.” *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 25 (January 1994): 30–49...

**Employment rate, selected groups, 2001  
(percent)**



## **11. Funding distribution**

Regardless of how funds are provided to school districts, funds are combined into one pool at the district level. In many districts there is school-based budgeting where funds are distributed at the discretion of the principal which, depending on the situation, may or may not benefit the students. This current funding distribution allows funds to be used differently from school to school.

Funding distribution must be transparent with public and visible measures of accountability.

What is essential is for adequate funding to be distributed equitably with the required ethic that all students with disabilities are of equal value as other students and deserving of an equal and appropriate education with whatever supports that requires.

### **3. What do you think is the greatest challenge to making changes or setting a new direction for special education in Alberta?**

The greatest challenge lies in reforming schooling practices and educational cultures that are prejudiced, consciously and unconsciously, against the inclusion of students with special needs.

For more than 20 years and in some instances close to 30 years, students with disabilities have had the opportunity to be included in Alberta classrooms; however, inclusive education still remains a marginalized educational practice. With all the advances being made, students with disabilities continue to experience rejection and exclusion.

For decades now parents know that April, May and June constitute the "season of fear" in Alberta. This is when parents are called to meetings with school officials to be told their son or daughter is being directed to a segregated placement or to encourage them to segregate their son or daughter. They are told year after year that there is not enough funding, teachers lack the knowledge, schools lack the resources, and that it was possible to include their son or daughter last year but not this next year, and/or their children would be better off if excluded.

When a child requires services such as speech therapy, alternative media, Braille or sign language, immediacy and timeliness are essential as any delay is detrimental to the development of the child who should not have to wait months to receive the services.

It must no longer be a matter of luck or chance that a parent finds a welcoming teacher, school or school district committed to providing a quality inclusive education. The current discriminatory, unethical, and inequitable response to the inclusion of students with special needs must come to an end. In turn, the focus must shift to ensuring the provision of quality inclusive education practices including access to the regular classroom, authentic assessments, and participation in the life of the school.

## **Vision**

**A vision is a picture of an ideal future that sets direction, inspires creativity and provides opportunities for all students. It should describe how the future will be different than today.**

### **4. What do students with special education needs require to achieve educational success?**

Students require welcoming and inclusive schools that practice effective teaching, ensure access to the regular curriculum with modification and adaptation when necessary, facilitation of relationships, and help students with special needs leave school with every opportunity for a successful and inclusive future.

## **5. What should we - as a province - be striving to achieve through special education?**

We require a unified educational system whereby special education is a resource to students, teachers, and parents. Students with special needs must be recognized for their gifts and talents and the contributions they bring to the regular classroom and our communities. The current special educational practices of focusing on student deficits and in particular, categorizing them according to these perceived deficits, is counter productive and results in high rates of underemployment and unemployment. We must strive to accomplish more than simply having students with disabilities complete their schooling to go to adult day programs or perpetual training with no valued outcomes. The most effective means in creating more positive futures lies in ensuring a quality inclusive education for all students.

**6. Alberta Education's Mission states that: "The Ministry of Education, through its leadership, partnerships and work with the public - including stakeholders - inspires, motivates and provides the necessary tools and opportunities for every child to attain the knowledge, skills and attributes required for lifelong learning, self-sufficiency, work and citizenship." Do you believe that this mission serves students with special education needs?**

**No**

Clearly, as self-evident by practice, this mission statement permits the involuntary exclusion and segregation of students with special needs. The mission is also shown to be insufficient given the poor post-school outcomes of students with special needs.

### **Guiding Principles**

**Guiding principles are deeply held beliefs that guide goal setting and action. While goals change over time, guiding principles stay the same.**

## **7. What words come to mind when you think about the ideal special education system for Alberta?**

- Inclusive education
- welcoming,
- inviting,
- quality,
- relationships,
- friends,
- regular curriculum,
- adaptations,

- modifications,
- authentic assessment,
- inclusive post-secondary education,
- meaningful careers,
- participation,
- effective teaching, and
- accountability.

## **8. What fundamental ideas need to guide special education in Alberta?**

Quality inclusive education; welcoming and inviting schools and teachers; facilitating peer relationships; access to the regular curriculum; adapting and modifying instruction and curriculum, as needed; authentic assessment; inclusive post-secondary education as an outcome; meaningful career possibilities as an outcome; participation in school and community life; honouring parental choice; seeing the inherent value in every student; wanting to teach in an inclusive classroom; an educational system that is required to accommodate students with special needs in regular classrooms.

For all students the education system should evolve into an asset-based system as opposed to the deficit-based system. Teachers will be required to have the required training to seek out a child's strengths and abilities and focus on the development of what the student does well. They will be challenged to demystify what it is that causes a student to struggle. This would be a complete paradigm shift where current teachers are trained to have students focus on the areas that they struggle in and do not achieve at class level while teaching a curriculum largely designed for the average to above average achiever.

The new direction must include a planned dissemination of its findings, standards, and mandates to absolutely everyone involved in education. Teachers, principals, school secretaries, school board members, and advanced education teacher training programs should be amongst the target audience.

The new direction must have a process to ensure that standards are reaching the classroom and being met by the school boards and their schools.

The new direction must report to the public the schools that show compliance to the standards and those that do not. This could be done in the same manner as the publication of the provincial exam rankings or by developing a public information web-based tool.

The new direction must ensure that the parents of a special needs child are an active participant in the strategic plan, goals, and strategies with respect to the child's education.

The new direction must have a clear and accessible, fair and independent appeal process that can be accessed and initiated in a timely manner.

The new direction must mandate the education of teachers currently in the education systems through mandatory professional development opportunities, workshops, and seminars.

Implement universal design for school buildings, education, and instruction principles within all schools funded by Alberta Education.

Schools must improve how they support students with disabilities in career planning.

### **9. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?**

- Within special education and behavioural classrooms in Alberta, there is an overrepresentation of aboriginal children and children from other cultural minorities (those who typically speak English as a second language). Too often inappropriate assessments, limited positive interactions with parents, and negative and/or lowered expectations lead to placement in special education classrooms where it is argued that these children will get more specialized attention. However, in fact, the student gets less academic challenge and a more limited curriculum. Furthermore, many of these students are streamed at school into congregated or other vocational programs resulting in limited career opportunities as they enter adulthood. This overrepresentation suggests racist and prejudicial practices similar to those reported in special education research literature across North America. This prejudicial placement practice needs to be challenged and ended.
- Over 60% of children 'in care' or receiving family enhancement supports have one or more disabilities (as cited in Alberta Children's Services and AACL 1998 study) and experience placements with multiple caregivers resulting in complicated interactions with school personnel. In general, these children are more often placed in special education classes and parents and foster parents are not given adequate information and support to consider inclusive educational choices. Given the vulnerabilities of these children, reduced advocacy for educational choices puts students at greater risk of an inadequate education, reducing employment opportunities, increasing likelihood of poverty, and increasing the risk of future marginalization.
- In some larger urban school districts, special education classes are placed in schools with low enrolments in an attempt to save the school from

closure and appease the local community. The resulting increase in numbers potentially protects the school from closure. This practice leads to an unnecessary increase in special education classrooms, and increased number of students, who must endure lengthy bus trips, which, in turn, intensifies demands on transportation resources. These children are consequently dislocated from their communities in the economic interests of other parents and communities.

- Students in special education classrooms are often scheduled to start school later and end earlier than typical students thereby shortening overall number of hours in class per day per week. Over the academic year students are commonly required to remain at home during exams or other special events held for typical students. The sum effect has been that students in special education classes have reduced time in classes throughout the school year and have less access to extracurricular and community activities.
- The categorical placement of students into special education placements leads to two additional negative impacts, other than those already mentioned. One is that some special education classrooms result in a larger age range among the students placed there making it difficult for them to have their age-appropriate needs met in an age-appropriate context. The second is that according to the category of students, they may be given more or less access to school resources, activities or interactions with non-disabled peers. As such, students with severe disabilities are given far less opportunities to access school resources than those students who are categorized as having more moderate disabilities.
- The continuation of segregated schools particularly for those students with severe and multiple disabilities leads some districts to recommend such schools as the best or only educational option available to parents therefore reducing the opportunity to seek more inclusive options while still accessing the necessary personal and technical supports. Subsequently many of the most expensive professional resources and materials (e.g. adaptive equipment) are clustered in one location and therefore not as accessible to other students who are included across the district.
- Alberta Education should collaborate with post-secondary education to deliver an integrated model of teacher training so that inclusive teaching practices are emphasized in every subject area and practicum experience. Ongoing mentorship and professional development in each district should embrace an integrated approach to all instructional and curriculum topics. Resource materials developed by Alberta Education should also identify and describe successful inclusive instructional practices that all teachers can apply in the regular classroom.

- The decision to undertake two simultaneous educational reviews implies that Alberta Education endorses a dual educational system- one for typical students and one for students with special needs. It is important to appreciate that parents will be confused as to whether their children with disabilities will be seen as equally valued and integral to Alberta Education in these reviews. Parents do not have the equivalent mechanisms/capacity that school districts and professional bodies have to fully participate in simultaneous reviews while remaining primary partners to ensure integration of recommendations across programs and services.
- There has been considerable educational research evidence to conclude that categorical assessments should be discontinued. Categorical assessments neither predict academic performance nor inform teaching practice. However, these findings should not be confused with the value of using appropriate prescriptive assessments and ongoing measures of learning to improve teaching strategies, curriculum adaptation and learning progress, and outcomes for children with disabilities. Incorporation of appropriate educational assessments provides practical feedback to students with disabilities, parents, and additional information to guide teachers as they adapt content to successfully address individual learning needs.
- All normative communication processes available to typical students (parent teacher nights, special events, etc.) should be available to parents and students with disabilities. There should be openness to ongoing regular contact between teachers and parents rather than restricting contact to mandatory IPP meetings.
- Assistive Technology - there needs to be greater access to assistive technologies, including assessments as to which technologies would best assist a student as well as improved means of enabling students to use these technologies. Given that many students with disabilities who go on to post-secondary education will benefit from the access to technologies available in those environments, post-secondary institutions should be engaged in working with schools to introduce children to these technologies at an earlier age.
- Some have suggested that all children be tested at an early age to screen for potential learning problems. This strategy, in addition to being expensive and a waste of resources, is more likely to have negative effects than positive outcomes. Many learning difficulties are school related and do not show up at an early age as is true for a number of disabilities, mental health issues, etc. In addition, too many children from minority groups are inappropriately placed in special education classes and early screening is likely to push more of them there sooner. Overall,

other children will simply be labelled, categorized, and marginalized at an earlier age.

- There are a number of proven strategies that should be implemented at an early age that would make a difference to all children and particularly children at risk. Socio-economic status is a bigger early predictor of assumed special education need than any other measure. By improving pre-natal and maternal health care, making quality child care available to all children, increasing inclusion within early child care environments, offering full day kindergarten, promoting reading by parents, providing parents and children with books when they cannot afford them, and access to computers with children's programs and other comparable approaches, it is possible to offset the presumed need for special education classes. These are proven strategies with actual positive outcomes.
- There are studies showing, as well, that educational inclusion improves the health status of students with disabilities. This would be a far better investment of funds than early screening of all children for the purposes of identification and not necessarily quality inclusion.