

Inclusive Education

[2012, revised 2015]

The Alberta Teachers' Association has a long history of involvement in and support for inclusive education, including Association initiatives such as the *Discussion Paper on Learning Coaches—Support for the Inclusive Classroom* (2011) and *The Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Inclusive Education in Alberta* (2014). Inclusion in Alberta has undergone significant change in recent years. In 2007, the Department of Education commenced a review of special education across the province that resulted in the *Setting the Direction Framework* (2009). This initiative was designed to create a renewed vision, principles, policy direction and accountability measures and a new funding distribution formula. In 2009, the Setting the Direction Steering Committee presented recommendations for creating an inclusive education system and the Government of Alberta followed with a formal response accepting all of the recommendations. This provided the framework for what is now referred to as *inclusive education*.

Definitions

The goal of inclusive education is to instill in students a sense of belonging and to help them achieve their full potential. The Association recognizes *inclusion* as a broad and complex term and therefore it is critical that collaborative planning take place at the provincial, jurisdiction and school levels to build understanding and support for the vision of inclusive education and to create short-, medium- and long-term implementation plans to guide the work.

Necessary Conditions

The Association supports the ideals of inclusion, with the proviso that students with exceptionalities are placed in the most enabling environments, as determined by teachers in consultation with other professionals. The learning environment must meet student needs and ensure that the following conditions are in place: (a) teachers and staff are provided with information about the individual needs of each student; (b) students with exceptionalities and other students in the same class have been prepared for inclusion; (c) teachers are provided with ongoing professional development; (d) regular access to professional support services (such as consulting and health support services) is provided; (e) appropriately trained educational assistants are provided; (f) appropriate resources, including assistive technology, are provided; (g) class size is reduced to effectively meet the needs of all students; (h) regular instructional time for the teacher is reduced to allow for effective development, implementation and monitoring of documents such as individual program plans; (i) learning opportunities are provided for students who are gifted and talented, through a balance of acceleration and enrichment; and (j) school boards have policies for handling emergency situations in schools that contain appropriate, specific procedures for individual students with exceptionalities. The Department of Education should institute weighting factors (where students with exceptionalities are recognized with higher weightings as appropriate) and should require that any class be limited to a maximum of 17 weighted students in K–3 and 20 weighted students in other grades. Reasonable class sizes improve the quality of education for all students and assist in achieving the ideals of an inclusive education system. In addition, the Department of Education must recognize in its curriculum and assessment policies and practices that there are multiple ways for students to learn and demonstrate what they know. Standardized assessments required by the Department of Education must not create barriers; furthermore, it should be recognized that it is teachers that are best positioned to determine the most appropriate mode of assessing individual student learning. If a member believes that the presence of a student with exceptionalities creates an unsafe classroom or is based on unsound educational practice, he or she should protest under article 8 of the Code of Professional Conduct and register such protest with the Association and the employing board. It is critical to provide a safe, professional environment where teachers and administrators can engage in open, critical and constructive dialogue concerning the implementation of inclusion.

Funding

Inclusion requires a wide range of resources and services to respond to student diversity. If the Government of Alberta aspires to a high-quality and fully inclusive education system, there must be adequate and consistent levels of funding and support for the following: (a) ongoing inservice for teachers; (b) appropriately trained educational assistants; (c) trained transportation and support personnel; (d) assessment and program implementation services; (e) specialized transportation equipment, and other specialized equipment and materials; (f) barrier-free buildings; (g) qualified health professionals, including medical and other professionals, to support medically fragile students; (h) smaller classes and a student–teacher ratio that takes into account the composition and complexity of each class; (i) reduction in instructional time required to collaborate with student support teams and other professionals; (j) reduction in instructional time to assist with the process of planning for and addressing student and program needs, including the development and monitoring of documents and tools such as individual program plans; (k) appropriate resources, including assistive technology; and (l) noninstructional services from government departments. It is imperative that the maintenance of such programs and services does not jeopardize the educational programs for all students and that resources provide direct support at the classroom level. The Department of Education should monitor and report on the utilization of inclusive education funding provided to school jurisdictions to determine the true cost of inclusion.

System Supports Required

Support for teachers to work within an inclusive education system must begin during preservice teacher education programs to provide a sound working knowledge of inclusion as well as the ability to specialize in inclusive education. The Department of Education, in cooperation with other government departments, should develop and fund programs for the early identification of and intervention for children with exceptionalities based on medical, educational, psychological or other factors that may affect educational readiness. Assessments should be administered both before and after the child enters the formal education system, and programs should include appropriate, timely and practical intervention strategies. There must also be adequate funding to effectively support students including (a) Indigenous First Nations, Metis and Inuit students; (b) English language learners; (c) children living in poverty; (d) children new to Canada; (e) children from refugee backgrounds; and (f) children who are suffering from trauma. Policies should include processes and guidelines for allocating resources that support inclusive approaches, as well as a decision-making process that ensures consultation with teachers and advice from parents on the effective use of resources. It is critical that the Department of Education has clear, multilevel, consistent and transparent communication with all stakeholders with respect to current directions, policies and regulations regarding inclusive education. Ongoing research in partnership with Alberta universities should be used to inform inclusion. When effective and consistent supports are in place, all students can learn and belong.