

SUCCESS FOR ALL

The teaching profession's views on
the future of special education in Alberta



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AN ATA RESEARCH UPDATE: FEBRUARY 2009

The door to happiness opens outwards. —Søren Kierkegaard



The Alberta
Teachers' Association

Acknowledgements

This research report, initiated through the foresight of the Alberta Teachers' Association's (ATA's) 2008 Annual Representative Assembly, represents the contributions of a number of dedicated teacher-leaders in the field of special education. The lead author, Dr Joan Jeary, is a teacher, a school and district administrator, a University of Calgary faculty member and an internationally recognized researcher who has committed much of her professional life to enhancing learning opportunities for all Alberta students. ATA staff officers Pat Dalton and Jacqueline Skytt brought extensive field and administrative experience to the analysis of this report and its policy implications, and to making recommendations for future action.

The Association's Special Education Council and the Gifted and Talented Education Council played a leadership role in involving practitioners in the development of this report, and in staging focus groups across the province. This work provided important advice to the ATA's Provincial Executive Council, which approved the publication of this important document.

The Alberta government's recent interest in reviewing future directions for special education is commendable. But as with so many public policy endeavours, we may find that at the end of the process, the complexity of the "special education" dialogue is limited by the way we frame the discussion. As one young teacher reminded me at a recent focus group meeting facilitated by the ATA, "What is so special about special education?" I found myself stammering for a response.

We hope that after reading *Success for All*, teachers will feel empowered and inspired to respond to the Government of Alberta's current initiative on special education, Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta, and to participate in the initiative's focus groups.

We hope for a future of hope and possibilities for all students. We trust that *Success for All* will help us achieve it.

J-C Couture

Alberta Teachers' Association

"If you want something different to happen, you must do something different."

—Sharon Di Santo

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“Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

—Vaclav Havel

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Executive Summary

In 2007, the Association surveyed teachers attending the fall conferences of the Special Education and the Gifted and Talented Education councils to gather information about their experiences in providing instruction to students with special needs. The survey focused in particular on their work related to developing and implementing individualized program plans (IPPs). To augment the survey results, the Association organized, throughout the province, a series of focus groups in March and April 2008. This report analyzes the data garnered from the survey and focus groups, looks at some of the larger philosophical questions associated with the delivery of educational services to exceptional learners and suggests how those services might be improved in the future.

Over the years, educators in the field of special education have struggled with two fundamental questions. The answers to these questions determine many related policy and funding decisions.

The First Fundamental Question

The first question is whether children deemed to have learning disabilities should be segregated and taught in special classes or whether they should be integrated into regular classrooms and educated with their peers. During the first half of the 20th century, the dominant approach was to segregate students with special needs, a practice that resulted in the evolution of a specialized educational approach known as *special education*. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the pendulum began to swing in the opposite direction, and

Although teachers overwhelmingly support the right of students with learning disabilities to be educated with their nondisabled peers, they nevertheless experience ongoing frustrations with the way that inclusive education has been implemented in the province of Alberta.

today most students with special needs are integrated into the regular classroom, a practice that has come to be called *inclusive education*. Although teachers overwhelmingly support the right of students with learning disabilities to be educated with their nondisabled peers, they nevertheless experience ongoing frustrations with the way that inclusive education has been implemented in the province of Alberta. Many of these frustrations appear to be rooted in the fact that the province is caught between two paradigms: the traditional special education approach and the more recent inclusive classroom approach.

One major concern is that the province has not developed a systematic action plan to support regular classroom teachers in carrying out such aspects of inclusive practice as assessing students, developing IPPs, designing appropriate instructional strategies for students with diverse learning needs

“Equity and current accountability requirements do not mesh. We need better ways to honour and measure learning.”

—Survey respondent

and supervising the work of paraprofessionals. A second concern is that many school jurisdictions have implemented inclusive education without fully dismantling the programs and services typical of traditional special education. As a result, the two systems end up competing for scarce resources. A third concern is that the inclusive classroom approach is incompatible with the province's standards-based approach to accountability whereby student progress is assessed according to predetermined levels of academic performance as measured by provincial achievement tests. Requiring students with special needs to write such tests merely confirms the obvious: namely, that they achieve at levels below those of other students.

Many school jurisdictions have implemented inclusive education without, at the same time, fully dismantling the programs and services typical of traditional special education. As a result, the two systems end up competing for scarce resources.

Fourth, some students, when included in the regular classroom, jeopardize the learning, safety and emotional wellness of their classmates. Yet the province has not developed any clear criteria for weighing the advantages of including a particular student against the disadvantages that might accrue to the group as a whole.

Recommendations

1. That Alberta Education develop guidelines and criteria to assist school jurisdictions in determining whether, in the case of an identified student, a regular classroom setting is in the best interests of the identified student and other students in the classroom. Such a determination should always be made in light of the fundamental principle that every student has an equal right to an educational program and that the first placement option should generally be an inclusive setting.
2. That Alberta Education align its funding framework to permit jurisdictions to provide a full spectrum of programs and services from inclusive to segregated so that one option does not have to be pursued at the expense of the other.
3. That Alberta Education, in consultation with teachers and parents, develop an evaluation framework for students with special needs that takes into account realistic standards for student outcomes. Such an evaluation framework should consider formally recognizing program completion in the case of students who are enrolled in ungraded programs and who are unable to meet the outcomes of the program of studies.

“Coding is an Alberta Education invention for funding and tracking. The impact of coding on students can be negative and limiting.”

—Survey respondent

“Teachers are forced to make choices about limited student supports and resources.”

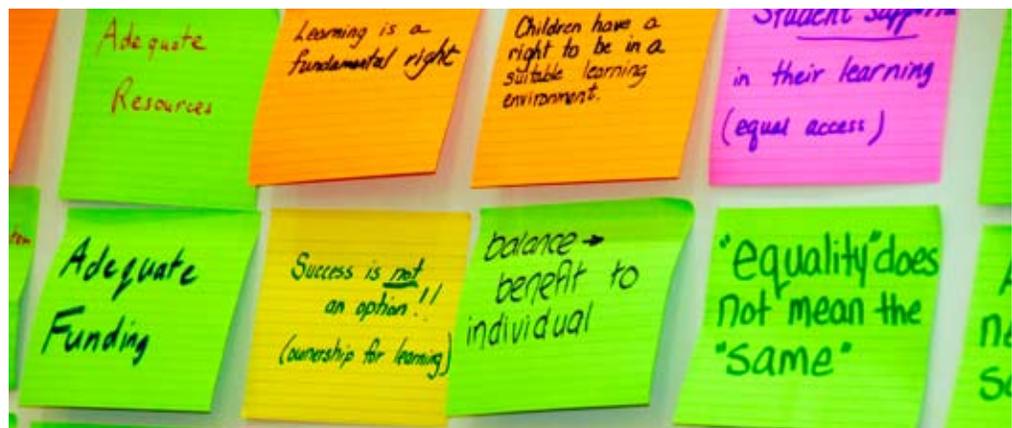
—Survey respondent

The Second Fundamental Question

The second question that shapes the delivery of services to students with special needs is whether or not to code students according to their exceptionalities. Those who support coding argue that it helps ensure not only that educators have a common understanding of learning needs but also that students gain access to additional services and supports. Those who oppose this approach contend that coding is harmful (leading to stigmatization and low self-esteem), extremely difficult to carry out (children do not fit neatly into prescribed categories) and somewhat arbitrary (many students who have difficulty learning and require extra assistance do not qualify for a special needs designation according to coding criteria). Given these concerns, many teachers believe that the province should either expand the coding system to more accurately reflect the diversity of students in today’s classrooms or abandon the coding approach altogether in favour of an approach that identifies the level of support that each student requires. Whichever approach the government chooses, teachers believe that earlier identification and intervention can greatly improve the outlook for children with learning difficulties.

Recommendations

4. That Alberta Education revise the system of determining eligibility for special educational services so that, rather than coding a student, it identifies the level of support that a student requires.
5. Should Alberta Education choose to maintain the current system of categorizing students, that it expand the categories to include learners who function slightly below the average range of intelligence and, as a result, require more time to learn than their classmates.
6. That Alberta Education, when determining a student’s eligibility for a special education designation, give equal weight both to the teacher’s observations and assessments and to other professional assessments and judgments.
7. That Alberta Education fund early literacy and numeracy programs for students identified as being at risk.



Learning Conditions

For learning to occur effectively in highly diverse classrooms, the following conditions must be in place: (1) class sizes should be small and inversely related to the number of students with special needs, (2) teachers and students must have uninterrupted time for instruction and (3) school boards should have the latitude to exclude from regular classes students who are highly disruptive and/or who pose a physical risk to other students. Study participants also agreed that teachers working in inclusive classrooms need (1) adequate time to prepare and to collaborate with other teachers; (2) access to professional development, workshops and courses to help them acquire the knowledge and skills to work with students with disabilities; (3) access to site-based special education/resource teachers; (4) access to the services of well-trained education/teaching assistants; (5) access to material resources that would help them to tailor their instructional strategies to the needs of their students; (6) access to assistive technology to help students learn more quickly; (7) access to an electronic template to help them prepare IPPs; and (8) coordinated support from principals, school board personnel, Alberta Education and other agencies that provide services to students.

Recommendations

8. That Alberta Education provide sufficient funding to enable jurisdictions to reduce class sizes, thereby creating conditions that research has shown are more conducive to effective teaching and learning.
9. That Alberta Education modify its funding formula and framework to take into account the composition and complexity of the class.
10. That jurisdictions grant every teacher adequate time during the school day to prepare to teach in inclusive and diverse classrooms. The importance of such preparation time cannot be overstated.
11. That Alberta Education fund professional development programs to help teachers acquire the knowledge and skills they require to work in inclusive and highly diverse classrooms.
12. That jurisdictions, through the leadership of principals, ensure that teachers have access to professional development opportunities related to inclusive practice.
13. That Alberta Education, in collaboration with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the College of Alberta School Superintendents, develop a provincial professional development action plan targeted at supporting teachers to meet the challenges posed by changing classroom demographics.
14. That jurisdictions provide teachers with the opportunity, during the school day, to meet with colleagues to discuss instructional and assessment strategies for students who are experiencing learning challenges. Such meetings, which could be incorporated into existing professional learning community agendas, would facilitate a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of all students.

“Special education leadership starts at the school level and requires district leadership. Leaders must be knowledgeable and respect student diversity.”

—Survey respondent

“Let’s do away with the emphasis on documentation and focus on the education of the special needs child.”

—Focus group participant

15. That Alberta Education provide jurisdictions with new targeted funding for the purpose of hiring special education teachers/resource teachers/learning support teachers and assigning them to schools in proportion to the number of students enrolled and the severity of their needs.
16. That Alberta Education establish criteria governing the knowledge, skills and experiences that teaching/educational assistants must possess in order to work with students having special needs.
17. That the Government of Alberta take measures to reduce the time that schools must wait to (a) access the assessment services provided by speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and other specialists and (b) receive reports once such assessments have been made.
18. That Alberta Education increase the number of copies of special education resources that it provides to schools.
19. That Alberta Education, in consultation with the Alberta Teachers’ Association and the College of Alberta School Superintendents, develop new materials related to such aspects of inclusive practice as (a) modifying the curricula to meet the needs of students who learn at different rates and (b) developing nonstandard ways of assessing students with special needs.
20. That Alberta Education, in consultation with classroom teachers, revise the requirements for individual program plans so as to make them less time-consuming and more practical for teachers to write.

Student-Centred Accountability

One other theme that clearly emerged in the study is the incompatibility between the province’s avowed support for inclusive education, on the one hand, and its dogged pursuit of a standards-based approach to accountability, on the other. Expecting students who have learning difficulties and/or who have not been exposed to the curricula to write provincial achievement tests is unhelpful. Much more productive would be to adopt an accountability mechanism that is student-centred, includes teachers’ own assessments and provides teachers with feedback that helps them to improve their practice.

Recommendations

21. That Alberta Education, in consultation with teachers, redesign the accountability policies and practices related to students with special needs.
22. That Alberta Education and school jurisdictions reduce the administrative paperwork required of teachers working with students with special needs.
23. That Alberta Education establish accountability policies and practices that honour the complexities of teaching and that support student learning.

Foreword

In July 2008, Minister of Education Dave Hancock announced Alberta Education's intention to "look comprehensively at special education in Alberta schools to ensure that each student reaches his or her potential." Hancock posed three specific questions: What does success for all students mean? What do we need to do in order to ensure success? What might be impeding the results we want for all students? Alberta Education will address these questions as part of a process to design a new special education framework in Alberta. Hancock described the review process as "re-evaluating our current approach to special education policy, accountability and funding."

As part of the review process, Alberta Education has invited the public to respond to a questionnaire and to participate in a series of community consultation sessions that will be held throughout the province. While many stakeholders will undoubtedly participate in the review process, it is especially important that teachers make their voices heard. Students, parents and guardians, school authorities, community agencies, and advocacy groups will take an active role in determining the vision and resulting framework for special education in the province. It is essential that Alberta Education consider the needs of students with disabilities in the classroom context, and there is no group more knowledgeable about this topic than teachers and their professional organization, the Alberta Teachers' Association.

During the 2007/08 school year, the Association conducted a survey on the teaching and learning conditions of students with special needs and organized a series of focus groups across the province to discuss the impact of individual program plans (IPPs) on the workload of teachers. This report summarizes the feedback obtained from the survey and focus groups.

"We should regularly provide time for PD, diagnostic assessments, exemplars, mentoring, implementing IPPs, and assessing progress."

—Focus group participant



Responding to Student Differences

“Teachers want to make a difference in the lives of their students. We work hard at doing this but sometimes students’ needs supersede our expertise. More training is needed to deal with the serious challenges we encounter when dealing with some of our students.”

—Survey respondent

Teachers have come to expect differences among their students with respect to such factors as culture, language, intellectual capacity, gender and socioeconomic status. The challenge for the classroom teacher is knowing how to respond, instructionally, to these differences. In a recent publication, Sleeter and Grant (2009) documented the effect of these differences on student achievement in the United States. In Canada, the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (1999) concluded that children with disabilities are vulnerable members of society whose opportunities to live full lives vary considerably. In 2001, the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), using data provided by Statistics Canada’s National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY), published a report on children and youth with special needs. (The NLSCY defines children with special needs to include those having medical and physical conditions such as allergies. Because children with allergies comprised the single largest group of special needs children, the CCSD excluded them from many of the analyses.) The report concluded that “the experience of children and youth with special needs at school is consistently less positive than it is for their peers without special needs. They miss more school, they change schools more often, they perceive themselves as not doing as well at school (as do their parents), they feel somewhat less positive about school, and they are slightly less likely to look forward to going to school” (p 43). To complement the NLSCY’s analysis, the CCSD surveyed school boards, provincial departments of education and other community-based agencies across the country to determine the services that they provide to children and youth with special needs. Of the 112 groups that responded to the survey, 23 per cent cited, as a major barrier, a shortage of trained staff, and 21 per cent cited a lack of financial resources. Participants were also asked to identify unmet needs. The most frequently cited unmet need was the need to address the dearth of services for children and youth with emotional or mental health problems. Respondents also mentioned the lack of recreation and social services in the school system. The CCSD report concluded that

One of the most serious challenges facing service providers is the lack of trained personnel. This included professional personnel such as specialists in mental health services, rehabilitation specialists and special education specialists. It also included a number of other kinds of personnel as well, such as aides, family and child support personnel, and early identification/intervention personnel. Children with mental health problems and those with behavioural difficulties seem to be worse off. Respondents reported that there were not enough services for these children, both in the community and in the schools. They reported that they did not have enough trained professional staff to work with these children. And they did not have adequate social and recreational services where these children could spend their time. (p 51)

Issues related to children and youth with special needs clearly exist across the country.

The Association's Concerns

For some time, the Association has been concerned about the teaching and learning conditions in Alberta schools, especially the lack of support for inclusive education for students with special needs. In September 1996, the Association established a Blue Ribbon Panel on Special Education, which identified a gap between factors known to support integration and inclusive education (as articulated by Alberta Education in 1995) and the conditions that actually existed in classrooms and schools at that time. The Blue Ribbon Panel subsequently made 24 recommendations that addressed such issues as leadership, governance, funding for severely disabled students, funding for students with mild/moderate disabilities and for gifted and talented students, and interdepartmental/interagency coordination. Interestingly, 12 years later, many of these same concerns continue to exist, and the recommendations included in the current report cover much of the same territory. The Association subsequently published two more reports—*Falling Through the Cracks* (2002) and *Improving Public Education: Supporting Teaching and Learning* (2002)—that addressed issues related to students with special needs and inclusive education as part of a larger examination of conditions in Alberta classrooms. Many of the problems identified in the 2002 reports are echoed in the current report. The Association has consistently supported special/inclusive education and has actively advocated for adequate funding and support to make such programs possible.



ATA staff officer Jacqueline Skytt (left) and Joan Jeary, lead author of *Success for All*, review comments from a focus group session.

“Changes occur too often concerning IPP parameters and expectations. Sometimes the students benefit from the changes but other times there is no definitive advantage to students in the new requirements. Little has been removed in terms of expectations for IPP elements, just added.”

—Survey respondent

“Policy changes are not communicated effectively—information usually slowly trickles down.”

—Survey respondent

In 2003, the Association adopted a set of policies defining diversity, equity and human rights in an educational context. According to this policy, schools should be inclusive learning communities that demonstrate the following characteristics:

- a respect for diversity, equity and human rights;
- support for the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child;
- respect for the values of cooperation, trust, caring, sharing, respect and responsibility;
- a commitment to racial harmony and gender equity;
- support for First Nations, Métis and Inuit education;
- support for initiatives that address the effect of poverty on children;
- a commitment to peace, global education and the prevention of violence; and
- support for the development of systemic and sustainable school/family/community partnerships.

The Association understands equity to mean treating all people fairly and justly in light of their unique circumstances, ensuring that all people have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential, and ensuring that oppressed and marginalized individuals and groups are included in society.

Schools exhibiting these characteristics are places of empathy and safety in which differences are valued. The Association fosters the development of schools as inclusive learning communities by supporting teaching practices that promote respect for diversity, equity and human rights; by supporting initiatives that schools, locals, specialist councils and other subgroups take to transform schools into inclusive learning communities; and by building partnerships with organizations that share similar values and concerns. The Association understands *equity* to mean treating all people fairly and justly in light of their unique circumstances, ensuring that all people have an equal opportunity to reach their full potential, and ensuring that oppressed and marginalized individuals and groups are included in society. It is within this conceptual framework of diversity, equity and human rights that the discussion and review of inclusive/special education must occur. These foundational beliefs also guide Alberta teachers in their attempts to provide high-quality learning experiences for all students.

This report documents the concern that teachers have about their ability to provide all students, not only those with special needs, with a high-quality learning environment. It also identifies factors that have assisted teachers in providing safe and inclusive learning environments. Finally, it recommends actions that the various education partners could undertake to improve the delivery of educational services to students with special needs.

Introduction

Special education is a response to human diversity and difference. More specifically, it is what educators do to help students who are experiencing difficulty in learning. These difficulties may be social or academic. Historically, educators responded to such situations by identifying and segregating students who required educational programming that differed from what was offered in the regular curriculum and classroom. Such segregation, in turn, led to the evolution of a parallel educational approach known as *special education*, an approach that continues to exist in Alberta as a structure for delivering educational programs to students deemed to have special educational needs. The field of special education has been both hailed as a means of achieving equal educational opportunity and denounced as a factor contributing to injustice in education.

The field of special education has been both hailed as a means of achieving equal educational opportunity and denounced as a factor contributing to injustice in education.

In the last 20 years, numerous initiatives have endeavoured to “mainstream,” “integrate” and “include” students with special needs into regular classrooms. In Alberta, the decision to fully integrate students with special needs into regular classrooms and neighbourhood schools was formally announced 18 years ago in an Alberta Education document entitled *Vision for the Nineties ... A Plan of Action*. Since that time, many papers have been written and reviews undertaken to examine the benefits of and issues associated with inclusive education. Whether students with special needs should attend their neighbourhood schools is no longer a matter of debate; the public now generally acknowledges that disabled students have the right to attend school with their nondisabled peers. Indeed, in its 2003 report, *Every Child Learns. Every Child Succeeds*, Alberta’s Commission on Learning noted that “78% of classes in Alberta had children with special needs” and that “out of a class of just over 24 students, three had mild or moderate needs and one had severe special needs” (p 70).

Although integration itself is no longer an issue, the following matters continue to generate controversy:

1. the process used to identify and assess students with special needs,
2. the amount of support available to both students and teachers,
3. the suitability of inclusive education for all students with special needs,
4. the kind of knowledge and skills that teachers require to effectively meet the educational needs of all learners,
5. the documentation required to access and/or justify funding, and
6. the adequacy of the funding.

“Administrators need to be supportive of special education and make it a priority.”

—Survey respondent

“Focus on transitions and future goals from the outset of a student’s education.”

—Survey respondent

The Association’s 2007 survey on the teaching and learning conditions of students with special needs, the subsequent focus groups on the same topic, and the Association’s recent annual member opinion, professional development and beginning teachers surveys all suggest that many teachers in Alberta are struggling to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. A review of the literature going back to 1995 reveals that the challenges facing Alberta teachers with respect to such matters as funding, the identification of students with special needs and educational accountability for students with special needs are not unique. Teachers across Canada as well as the United States are reporting the same concerns.

This report will discuss the tensions that currently exist in special education, document the frustrations that Alberta teachers are experiencing, identify factors that make a positive difference and recommend ways of improving inclusive/special education.



Philosophical Tensions

To Include or Not to Include

During the last 100 years, ideas about special education have shifted significantly. In the early 1900s, the predominant model for understanding human differences was a medical one according to which people were classified as being either normal or abnormal/disabled. Based on this model, children deemed to be abnormal were labelled as having a specific disability or disorder and placed in special classes or institutions. Pedagogical practices then emerged to respond to individuals classified as having specific disabilities and disorders. By the 1960s, however, this approach began to change as people became more aware of the negative effects of such segregation. This heightened sensitivity, in turn, produced a movement toward desegregation and integration. At first, this movement was referred to as *mainstreaming*. However, by the mid-1980s, the term had fallen out of favour and was replaced by the term *inclusive schooling*. At the same time, educators began to emphasize the importance of equity and opportunity for all students.



“There should be flexible grouping for special needs students. There is confusion about inclusion.”

—Survey respondent

Alberta’s current ideology for supporting students with special needs contains elements of both the traditional special education approach and the more recent move toward inclusive education. Indeed, in some ways, Alberta appears to be caught between the two paradigms.

Despite these changes, some researchers have continued to defend segregation and to look for teaching practices that are particularly effective when applied to students with disabilities. Others, such as Cook and Schirmer (2003), claim that the practices developed for students with special needs work equally well for all students. In their view, virtually no teaching practices have been identified that make special education “special.”

Alberta’s current ideology for supporting students with special needs contains elements of both the traditional special education approach and the more recent move toward inclusive education. Indeed, in some ways, Alberta appears to be caught between the two paradigms. Alberta Education’s (2004, 1) *Standards for Special Education* states that “educating students with special

“Boards should set specific time allowances for IPPs. For example, if you have three students with IPPs you may be entitled to a substitute teacher for a half day.”

—Focus group participant

education needs in inclusive settings is the first placement option to be considered by school boards in consultation with parents and, when appropriate, students.” Attempting to implement this directive raises four significant concerns.

First, Alberta Education has not developed a systematic, provincewide action plan to support regular classroom teachers in assuming the challenge of inclusive practice. This lack of support is evident in the frustration that many teachers report in undertaking such tasks as assessing students, developing individual program plans (IPPs), designing appropriate instructional responses for particularly challenging learners and supervising the work of paraprofessionals in the classroom. All these tasks assume that the teacher has at least some background knowledge about disabilities.

Second, most school jurisdictions in Alberta have organized supports and

Although Alberta Education has developed policies and regulations intended to ensure inclusion and social justice, it has not adjusted its expectations with respect to student performance on provincial tests in a way that reflects the reality of the inclusive classroom.

services to promote and support inclusive education without, at the same time, fully dismantling the programs and services typical of traditional special education. Such jurisdictions continue to maintain special classes and even special schools. These classes and schools and the infrastructure necessary to sustain them require extensive resources. Although most school districts continue to fund two systems for supporting students with identified special needs—a traditional special education system and an inclusive system—they lack the funding to provide high-quality programs and services in both. Because these two delivery systems each require facilities, teachers, teacher assistants, psychologists and district specialists, they often end up competing for resources.

The tension between the philosophies of segregation and inclusion raises a third concern: namely, the incompatibility between the province’s standards-based approach to accountability and the reality that many students in an integrated classroom will never reach predetermined levels of academic performance as measured by provincial achievement tests. The conundrum is one of diversity and difference. Although Alberta Education has developed policies and regulations intended to ensure inclusion and social justice, it has not adjusted its expectations with respect to student performance on provincial tests in a way that reflects the reality of the inclusive classroom. In a standards-based approach to accountability, student outcomes are the measure of professional performance, and schools are the basic unit of accountability. Such an approach also emphasizes the importance of publicly reporting student achievement (Skrtec, Harris and Shriner 2005). Inclusive education tells us that “all learners are welcome and included, in all their diversity and exceptionalities, in the regular classroom in the neighbourhood school with their age peers” (Jordan 2007, xii). The dissonance between these



two approaches is confusing to students, parents and teachers. In the classroom, teachers struggle to make sense of these two worlds.

A fourth concern is that some students, when included in the regular classroom, jeopardize the learning, safety and emotional wellness of their classmates. Regular classroom teachers report that they have experienced physical injury and that their ability to teach is

sometimes seriously compromised by the behaviour of students with severe emotional, behavioural and/or mental health issues. Although teachers embrace the notion of inclusive education and recognize the right of all children to access appropriate educational programs, they also believe that their primary function is to ensure that teaching and learning take place effectively. The criteria used to determine whether the advantages that one student might experience by being included in the classroom outweigh the disadvantages that might accrue to the group as a whole are currently unclear.

Recommendations

1. That Alberta Education develop guidelines and criteria to assist school jurisdictions in determining whether, in the case of an identified student, a regular classroom setting is in the best interests of the identified student and other students in the classroom. Such a determination should always be made in light of the fundamental principle that every student has an equal right to an educational program and that the first placement option should generally be an inclusive setting.
2. That Alberta Education align its funding framework to permit jurisdictions to provide a full spectrum of programs and services from inclusive to segregated so that one option does not have to be pursued at the expense of the other.
3. That Alberta Education, in consultation with teachers and parents, develop an evaluation framework for students with special needs that takes into account realistic standards for student outcomes. Such an evaluation framework should consider formally recognizing program completion in the case of students who are enrolled in ungraded programs and who are unable to meet the outcomes of the program of studies.

“When ECS students come for orientation in June, arrange time for one-on-one meetings between the teacher and student to allow for early identification of special needs.”

—Focus group participant

“All of this student labelling, is it working?”

—Survey respondent

To Code or Not to Code

For years, educators have debated the benefits and disadvantages of labelling or coding students according to their disabilities. The practice of coding is rooted in a paradigm that views human differences as pathological and problematic as opposed to natural and benign. Those who support coding argue that recognizing differences and giving them a label ensures that educators develop a common understanding about how students function in a learning environment. They also claim that coding helps ensure that students gain access to additional services and supports. Detractors of coding contend that identifying someone as different implies that that person has less social value than others and, as a result, does not deserve to be treated fairly. They also point out that a label can be stigmatizing and can lead to low self-esteem. In educational circles, the decision about whether or not to label is not an easy one. On the one hand, recognizing a student’s differences helps to ensure that the student gains access to individualized programs and services that might not otherwise be available. On the other hand, labelling the student as different may be stigmatizing. The challenge is to provide individually relevant programs while, at the same time, ensuring that stigmatization and devaluation are kept to a minimum.

In educational circles, the decision about whether or not to label is not an easy one. On the one hand, recognizing a student’s differences helps to ensure that the student gains access to individualized programs and services that might not otherwise be available. On the other hand, labelling the student as different may be stigmatizing.

One major problem with the coding approach is that the process of identifying children as having special needs is extremely difficult. Many jurisdictions still use the medical model adopted in the early years of special education. This model, which typically involves referral, testing, labelling, placement and programming (Andrews and Lupart 2000), is problematic for three reasons. First, children do not always fit neatly into the prescribed categories. Furthermore, classifications are often based on tests that rely on inferential information (that is, on a sample of the child’s skills and behaviour) and are made by people who have never met or worked with the child before the one-on-one testing sessions. As a result, the test results do not always accurately reflect how the child might actually respond as a learner in a classroom situation. Second, not all students with disabilities have special educational needs or require special educational support. Third, assessment can be expensive and still not yield information that readily translates into instructional strategies.

Some progressive school districts have abandoned the medical model in favour of a multilevel assessment process that gathers information from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways. In this process, the teacher not only helps assess students but also receives support in designing appropriate

instructional strategies for them. Assessment and intervention are interwoven, and the emphasis is on linking instructional strategies to identified learning needs rather than on assessing students for the purpose of coding them.

A second major concern with the present system of coding students is that it assumes that there are two types of students: those who qualify for special education services and those who do not. Parents and teachers, however, understand that, in most classrooms, the students with special needs are not the only ones who require individual consideration and support. Alberta's student population is extremely diverse. It includes students who

- have recently immigrated and for whom English is not a first language,
- are living in poverty,
- learn more slowly than their peers but who are ineligible for a special education designation,
- live in dysfunctional families,
- have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and require additional support, and
- have motivational and attitudinal problems.

It also includes children in the primary grades who require extra assistance in learning to read and write but who do not exhibit a sufficient discrepancy between presumed ability and achievement to warrant being classified as learning disabled. This mixture of characteristics and abilities in a typical classroom inevitably affects the teaching-learning process. Teachers are aware of the diverse learning needs of their students and respond by ensuring that each student has equal access to the curriculum and to available resources and materials. Teachers also try to spend time with each student and to modify the content and their teaching strategies to accommodate the needs of individual students. Teachers take this approach regardless of whether a particular student has been identified as having special needs

Teachers are aware of the diverse learning needs of their students and respond by ensuring that each student has equal access to the curriculum and to available resources and materials.

according to coding criteria. In any case, the coding criteria are somewhat arbitrary and subject to change. Furthermore, because coding speaks only to some individual differences, it does not encompass the diversity found in most classrooms or the challenges of responding instructionally to these differences. In an American study, Ysseldyke (2001) identified 40 ways of operationalizing the definition of learning disabilities. He then demonstrated that, depending on the criteria used, a particular student might or might not be deemed to have a learning disability. Ysseldyke concluded that "large numbers of students are failing to acquire academic and social skills. Some have been sorted out as eligible for special education services. Yet, there are not reliable psychometric differences between those labeled learning disabled (LD) and low-achieving students" (p 304).

"Establish realistic criteria for coding within a classroom setting."

—Survey respondent

“Class composition should determine class size so teachers can work on specific goals for special needs students.”

—Focus group respondent

Alberta teachers are frustrated not only by the amount of time and money that the coding process involves but also by the fact that many students requiring an individual program or a significant modification to the regular curricula are not eligible for a special education code. In the case of students who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and who learn much more slowly than their classmates, for example, teachers often have to develop a behaviour plan, modify the expectations as to when the student will master the content and apply a different evaluation strategy. Yet, according to Alberta Education criteria, these students do not qualify for a special education code. Teachers have suggested either that the coding system be expanded to more accurately reflect student needs or that the province adopt

Alberta teachers are frustrated not only by the amount of time and money that the coding process involves but also by the fact that many students requiring an individual program or a significant modification to the regular curricula are not eligible for a special education code.

a noncategorical approach, which would use ecological and interactive assessments of special education needs and would focus on strengths as opposed to deficits. Teachers are also concerned that so much funding goes into carrying out the assessments associated with coding that little is left for educational programming in the classroom.

No discussion of the assessment, identification and coding of students with special needs would be complete without considering the importance of early identification and early intervention. Many students in kindergarten and the primary grades have social and learning difficulties. Some of those students continue to experience difficulty throughout their school years, during which time they are eventually coded and gain access to special education supports and services. Others make great gains and keep pace with their age-appropriate peers. Still others make minimal gains, continuing to struggle throughout their school years but never becoming eligible for a special education designation. These different outcomes can be explained in many ways. One obvious explanation is that students differ in their innate cognitive abilities. Another is that some of these students were exposed to research-based instructional practices that improved their literacy and numeracy whereas others were not.

The efficacy of both early intervention and specific instructional strategies is well documented in the literature. How students respond to intensive early intervention helps teachers understand their learning style, set expectations and adapt instructional strategies to meet their needs. Many teachers believe that early intervention in reading and numeracy should be part of a special education framework and that every child who has difficulty learning how to read in the early grades should have access to evidence-based early intervention. The rationale for this approach is that some children will respond positively to the intervention and experience success in school. Even

students who do not respond positively to the intervention will benefit because the teacher will have a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) argue that the term *learning disabilities* should be redefined to mean an inadequate response to instruction. In this approach, students would be identified using a risk rather than a deficit model, they would be identified earlier so that they could receive appropriate instruction, bias related to their identification would be reduced and the teacher would focus on student outcomes. Using early intervention to identify students with learning disabilities, however, is not without its challenges: validated intervention models are not widely available, arriving at a diagnosis of learning disabled takes time and may involve a series of interventions, the intervention requires a high level of intensity, additional assessment information may be needed, and adequately trained personnel to implement the instructional intervention may not be available. These factors notwithstanding, a compelling case can still be made for using early identification and intervention in kindergarten and continuing through the primary grades.

Recommendations

4. That Alberta Education revise the system of determining eligibility for special educational services so that, rather than coding a student, it identifies the level of support that a student requires.
5. Should Alberta Education choose to maintain the current system of categorizing students, that it expand the categories to include learners who function slightly below the average range of intelligence and, as a result, require more time to learn than their classmates.
6. That Alberta Education, when determining a student's eligibility for a special education designation, give equal weight both to the teacher's observations and assessments and to other professional assessments and judgments.
7. That Alberta Education fund early literacy and numeracy programs for students identified as being at risk.



“Smaller class sizes, with a limit on the number of IPPs required, would make it easier for teachers to manage differentiated instruction.”

—Focus group respondent

Life in the Classroom

Asked if teaching brought them satisfaction, 80 per cent of the teachers who responded to the Association's 2008 Member Opinion Survey stated that it did. Among the sources of satisfaction cited were job security, salary, professional autonomy, technical support and work climate.

Respondents often commented that they loved teaching and interacting with students and colleagues. The remaining 20 per cent, however, told a different story, observing that they found teaching frustrating and overwhelming.

The Association's 2007

Member Opinion Survey

revealed that 12 per cent of teachers are considering leaving the profession within five years for reasons other than retirement. Their two highest sources of dissatisfaction were large class sizes and the inadequacy of support for



“Allocate funds to hire learning assistance/resource teachers to assist teachers in writing IPPs and to provide classroom support to students, but ensure the caseload is appropriate to the number of and needs of the students.”

—Focus group participant

In 2003, immediately following the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning, teachers reported that the support for students with special needs had improved. By 2005, however, 25 per cent of teachers reported that conditions for students with special needs had worsened, a number that rose to 39 per cent in 2008.

students with special needs. Over the years, the Member Opinion Survey has also asked teachers whether support for special needs students has improved or worsened. In 2003, immediately following the report of Alberta's Commission on Learning, teachers reported that the support for students with special needs had improved. By 2005, however, 25 per cent of teachers reported that conditions for students with special needs had worsened, a number that rose to 39 per cent in 2008. The survey also indicated that this erosion occurred consistently throughout the province.

Teachers have a clear sense of their professional identity, understand their responsibilities and are willing to discuss the factors that both facilitate and impede their ability to teach effectively. The special needs survey that the Association administered in the fall of 2007 and the subsequent focus groups revealed a wealth of information about the conditions that teachers believe must be in place in order for them to teach effectively in highly diverse classrooms. Following is a summary of the major themes that emerged in the responses to the survey and focus groups.

The Learning Environment

Few educators would disagree with the claim that the classroom environment has a major impact on students' academic achievement and social development. Many articles and books have been written on the relationship between classroom climate and academic achievement. Although the classroom climate is often taken for granted, a positive classroom climate does not just happen by chance. Instead, it is the product of intentional planning and efforts by both teachers and students. The heart of the classroom climate is the quality of the relationships that exist between students and their teacher and among students. In an interview about caring communities, Nel Noddings (2005) described the "ethic of care as being a thoroughly relational ethic." She added that the ethic of care

Emphasizes our moral interdependence and doesn't center on the individual moral agent. I often say to classes and audiences that how good I can be depends partly on how you treat me. We need to realize that. It isn't just a matter of a set of virtues in the moral agent. It's a matter of the whole climate to be built up in the kinds of relationships we establish. (p 71)

Although important for all children and youth, the teacher–student relationship is critical for students who are vulnerable and who require extra care and attention.

The relationships that exist in the classroom and the quality of the learning environment are critical factors in student learning. Teachers must know their students well in order to teach them. The interactions that students have with one another enhance their ability to learn. Considerable research demonstrates that youth at risk who have a strong relationship with a caring adult are more likely to make life-altering changes and to succeed in life. Although important for all children and youth, the teacher–student relationship is critical for students who are vulnerable and who require extra care and attention.

Two factors that strongly affect the formation of classroom relationships are (1) class size and composition and (2) the amount of time available for working together. Many teachers who responded to the survey and participated in the focus groups emphasized the importance of class size and composition. They often expressed frustration with the lack of time available to form relationships and to get to know their students as learners. The total number of students in the classroom, the number of students with special needs and the number of students with exceptional needs not recognized by the current coding system are all factors that increase the demands and expectations on teachers to a level that some teachers find untenable.

Two other factors that play an important role in creating an optimal learning environment are (1) the existence of a learning community in which students work together and contribute to one another's learning and (2) the

“There is an emphasis on form over function with regard to IPP requirements. Many changes do not translate into big-time advantages for coded kids, but they do result in more training, time and work for teachers writing IPPs.”

—Focus group participant

“Recognize that special needs students in classrooms require more of a teacher’s time and energy—so acknowledge that in funding so class sizes can be smaller.”

—Focus group participant

availability of uninterrupted time for instruction. Although respondents were generally appreciative of the services and support available from the Student Health Partnership, some expressed concern that students using this service often missed valuable instructional time. Furthermore, maintaining a learning community was difficult because students requiring special services were constantly coming and going. One teacher described her classroom some mornings as a revolving door. Another problem with this approach is that teachers, whose first priority is teaching their students, are not available to speak to outside professionals or specialists during class time. Stakeholders must recognize the primacy of instruction and understand that frequent interruptions disrupt the flow and continuity of learning.

Centrality of Preparation

To teach effectively, teachers must have time to prepare. Teaching in a diverse and inclusive classroom requires even more preparation time. Inclusive practice requires the teacher to recognize, accommodate and meet the learning needs of all students, an obligation that demands considerable planning and preparation. Designing instruction requires the teacher to identify instructional goals and objectives based on the curriculum

To ensure consistency within grades and across subjects, teachers must plan together.

(modifying those expectations to match the unique characteristics of each student), to decide the processes and strategies to be used in teaching the lesson (again, choosing different instructional tools to engage diverse learners), to assemble the necessary materials and resources, and to decide how to evaluate the extent to which learning has taken place. An effective classroom requires much thoughtful—and sometimes painstaking—planning and preparation. To ensure consistency within grades and across subjects, teachers must plan together. Team planning enables teachers to set expectations that are specific and appropriate to the community, share resources and learn from one another. Although the need for planning is obvious, the biggest obstacle for teachers is lack of time.

Teachers reported that they have insufficient time to prepare. What time they do have is eroded by such emergent needs as having to fill in for another teacher because no substitute teacher is available, having to attend a meeting with an outside professional/specialist or a parent about a student with special needs, and having to write individual program plans (IPPs) for coded students in their classroom. An overwhelming number of participants in the focus groups expressed frustration with the amount of time required to write IPPs. Most teachers stated that they do not receive in-school time to write IPPs and, as a result, end up performing this task in the evenings and on weekends. In addition to taking a lot of time to prepare, IPPs require the teacher to attend IPP conferences after school, a time when teachers could be planning lessons, participating in extracurricular activities and working with students who require extra assistance. Respondents’ concerns about IPPs are reported in more detail in the section “Individual Program Plan Resources.”

High-Quality Learning Environments for All Students

Although teachers recognize that all students are entitled to a safe and high-quality learning environment, they are concerned that some students with severe emotional and/or mental health disorders can pose a safety risk to other students or disrupt the classroom in a way that renders learning impossible. Some respondents noted that teachers and teaching assistants have been injured while attempting to intervene in these circumstances. The situation is even worse when the class is large and the teacher is unable to respond without emotionally upsetting the learning community. In short, teachers believe that the learning experience of one student should not occur at the expense of the other children. In the quest to include all children in regular classrooms and schools, educators must make responsible decisions that do not jeopardize the right of other children to learn.

Pedagogy and Instruction

Pedagogy is the “art or science of being a teacher” (as defined by Wikipedia). In the Association’s 2003 report *Trying to Teach, Trying to Learn: Listening to Students*, author Hans Smits uses the term *pedagogy* to refer to “the qualities of the relationship between teaching and learning as experienced by students and to the practices that, in the view of students, support successful learning” (p 27). The report also notes that “programs, technology, formal outcomes, plans and methods notwithstanding, learning ultimately depends on the complex relationship among the teacher, the students and the subject matter” (p 1). Teaching is a complex activity. Hegarty (2007, 533) describes this complex, knowledge-based activity as “comprising a multiplicity of cognitive, affective and interpersonal elements,



“I believe that integrating special needs students into my classroom has helped me to do a better job with all my students.”

—Focus group participant

“All teachers need ongoing training about learning strategies for students with special needs.”

—Focus group participant

and teachers draw on these elements in diverse ways in response to the different teaching/learning situations they encounter.” But it is not just about the teacher. Shor (2005, 107) writes that “students should be treated as complicated, substantial human beings who have a right to take part in the making of their own education. Education should not be done to them, but education should be something they do with each other for themselves.” Teachers must reflect and plan carefully to engage students so that they assume ownership of their learning, pose and pursue questions related to the curricula, and engage in self-assessment. Teaching in this way takes time, interpersonal relationships and a deep understanding of both the students and the curricula.

What is critical is that teachers have opportunities, both during their preparation programs and in the workplace, to develop their professional identity, knowledge and skills by participating in a knowledge community.

Although teachers must still engage in such fundamental classroom-focused tasks as planning, teaching and assessing, inclusive practice also requires that they collaborate with other professionals, an activity that requires good communication skills. Teachers in an inclusive setting also need to understand decision-making processes involving groups of people, including parents, who are stakeholders in a student’s development and learning. Even more importantly, teachers in highly diverse classrooms must be able to tailor their responses to the unique needs of each student. To do so, they need to be familiar with research-based practices that enable them to adapt their instruction to a wide variety of learners.

Not unsurprisingly, experienced teachers are more adept at tailoring their mode of instruction than novice teachers. But how does this expertise develop? According to Berliner (2001), teachers move through five stages of development: novice, advanced beginner, competent practitioner, proficient practitioner and expert. Glaser observes that, throughout this developmental progress, teachers move from being “externally supported” to being “transitional” to being “self-regulated” (cited in Kershner 2007). As teachers develop, they do not simply acquire and apply knowledge. In addition, they begin to understand things in a different way and then change how they think and act. This stage is sometimes described as transformational because it requires teachers to seek new meaning and to look beyond the immediate task. Some beginning teachers, of course, may already understand this deeper approach to learning, but experience helps to foster it. What is critical is that teachers have opportunities, both during their preparation programs and in the workplace, to develop their professional identity, knowledge and skills by participating in a knowledge community.

Teachers who participated in the focus groups and responded to the survey frequently mentioned the value of learning from colleagues, whether by having a mentor or by participating in a professional learning community. Respondents also observed that they obtained valuable information and ideas by consulting outside specialists. Still others mentioned that they benefited from the presence of on-site special education/resource teachers,

who helped them acquire the skills needed to work with a wide range of students, including those with severe or uncommon disabilities or disorders. Even more importantly, these on-site specialists helped them to develop and implement IPPs. Beginning teachers noted that the preservice training they received with respect to developing IPPs was very helpful.

The study suggests that teachers grow professionally in at least four ways: first, by completing an initial teacher preparation program; second, by consulting on-site and external specialists about specific students; third, by participating in professional learning communities; and fourth, by attending workshops and sessions on specific issues such as fetal alcohol syndrome and autism spectrum disorder. Participants in the study stated that they could

Beginning teachers noted that the preservice training they received with respect to developing IPPs was very helpful.

benefit from three kinds of professional support: (1) professional development, in the form of more opportunities to attend workshops on such topics as IPPs, universal design and differentiated instruction; (2) professional tools, in the form of templates, IPP resource binders, and other print and online resources; and (3) professional consultation, in the form of opportunities to consult both in-school and district specialists as well as to work with designated mentors. Participants also recommended that principals be sensitized to special education issues and urged to address them in the school's professional development plan.

Supports for Learning and Teaching

No single teacher can be expected to have the expertise and skills necessary to teach and assess all students in a highly diverse classroom. Education is a shared responsibility, especially in the area of inclusive/special education. To be effective and responsive to the needs of individual students, inclusive education requires collaboration among many stakeholders, including parents, administrators, other teachers and specialists. Most teachers have confidence in their professional skills, but they recognize that they can't do it all. As a result, they both want and need a wide range of services and supports for themselves and their students. They want to be active and central players in a learning team.

Following is a description of the supports participants in the study stated that they require to address the needs of students in an inclusive classroom. These resources and supports exist in some schools but not others.

Human Resources

Many participants in the study emphasized the importance of school-based special education expertise. Site-based special education/resource teachers are important for two reasons: (1) to build the capacity of classroom teachers by helping them to write IPPs and to develop differentiated teaching strategies and (2) to work with individual students or small groups of

“I’m suffering from paperwork overload (testing, pediatricians, assessments, diagnosis, social services, etc).”

—Focus group participant

“Time needs to be made available to collaborate with outside agencies and specialists.”

—Focus group participant

students both in and out of the classroom. Respondents emphasized that administrators must allow site-based special education/resource teachers to focus on special needs education rather than assign them other responsibilities that eat into their time. Some respondents suggested that special education/resource teachers should be called *learning support teachers* or *learning strategy teachers*, titles that would better describe their function in an inclusive environment.

A second human resource that participants identified as being essential are well-trained education/teaching assistants. Virtually all respondents agreed that these paraprofessionals require entry-level training as well as ongoing opportunities to increase their knowledge and skills with respect to child development, specific disabilities and disorders, behaviour management, and

Participants observed that they could benefit from having access not only to district specialists, psychologists, and speech and language therapists but also to outside experts who specialize in working with the deaf and hard of hearing, the visually impaired, and people having other relatively rare disabilities.

communication. Inadequately trained teaching assistants become a burden for the teacher, who then has to plan both for the students and for the assistant. Untrained assistants require greater direction, monitoring and supervision.

Participants observed that they could benefit from having access not only to district specialists, psychologists, and speech and language therapists but also to outside experts who specialize in working with the deaf and hard of hearing, the visually impaired, and people having other relatively rare disabilities. Many respondents noted that the professionals offering these services often have very long waiting lists and take so long to issue their reports that teachers are unable to use them in developing IPPs.

Material Resources

Many respondents observed that, although Alberta Education’s special education resources are useful and of high quality, multiple copies should be available in every school. Teachers noted that they had difficulty accessing the binders, especially at the point in the school year when they were writing IPPs. Indeed, some teachers stated that every teacher should have a copy of the IPP binder.

Respondents suggested that Alberta Education should develop new resources on inclusive practice to help teachers with such practical matters as adapting their instructional strategies to meet the needs of students with varying abilities and assessing students with disabilities. Others expressed the need for a handbook explaining how to adjust curricular expectations and evaluative criteria in the case of children with special needs.

Technological Resources

Some respondents indicated that their school lacked the funding necessary to purchase assistive technology for students with disabilities. Both hardware and software were mentioned as being in short supply. Although appropriate assistive technology could make a significant difference in the learning of some students, in some parts of the province such technology is unavailable.

In addition to citing a need for more assistive technology, many respondents suggested that the province should develop an electronic template (including a resource bank of goals and objectives) to help teachers prepare IPPs. An overwhelming number of participants stated that current IPP requirements are unreasonable. Not only is the IPP document too complex, requiring much time and labour to complete, but no standards exist at the provincial level and sometimes at the jurisdictional level with respect to format. Many respondents suggested that IPPs should be simplified and standardized and that they should focus on strengths rather than deficits. Additional comments about IPPs appear in the section “Individual Program Plan Resources.”

Leadership Resources

Life in schools is complex and uncertain. The pace of change is rapid and unyielding. Fullan (2001, ix) notes that “the more complex society gets, the more sophisticated leadership must become.” For that reason, school leaders must not only understand what life is like in the classroom but also ensure that beliefs, policies, practices and accountability mechanisms are closely aligned. Teachers want the issues that interfere with teaching and learning in their classrooms to be addressed. They are seeking leaders at the school, district and government levels who can coordinate and mobilize funding and policy in a way that supports students with special needs.



“Increased funding is required for assistive technology in order to increase student success.”

—Focus group participant

“Visionary, supportive and knowledgeable administration offers opportunities for collaboration, coaching and peer support assistance in the writing and implementation of IPPs.”

—Survey respondent

Principals: Participants in the focus groups observed that school-based administrators, particularly principals, play a significant role in addressing special education issues at the school level. They stated that having a principal who is supportive, knowledgeable about teaching students with special needs and available at the school makes a significant difference in their ability to focus on student needs. They emphasized that principals need to provide teachers with time to access professional development, develop programs in collaboration with their colleagues, share ideas and reflect on best practices. They also suggested that all incoming teachers be trained during their first year on how to plan, develop and implement an IPP. Other respondents suggested that, when developing class lists, school

Principals should find the funding to acquire assistive technology for students who require it.

leaders should consider the number of students with special needs and the concomitant number of IPPs that need to be written. Grouping students in this way would then determine how much release time the classroom teacher requires to write IPPs and how much assistance he or she requires from special education teachers and education/teaching assistants. Respondents also stated that principals should find the funding to acquire assistive technology for students who require it. Finally, they recommended that principals ensure that teaching/education assistants are well trained and are given sufficient time to enable them to work in the classroom as well as attend planning and debriefing meetings with the teacher.

District Staff: Teachers recognize that district staff have the capacity to advocate on behalf of students with special needs and encourage them to do so both with the school district and with Alberta Education. Following are some of the leadership actions that respondents suggested school jurisdictions could take to facilitate the work of special education teachers: (1) develop a vision for special education that includes support teams, (2) develop a differentiated funding model that recognizes the complexity of some schools, (3) develop a cohesive and comprehensive professional development plan for teachers and education/teaching assistants, (4) develop professional tools such as a user-friendly Web-based IPP program, (5) help teachers to develop resources that take into account evidence-based practice and (6) ensure that district accountability procedures are cost-effective in terms of teachers’ time and labour. Additional comments about IPPs appear in the IPP section below.



The Provincial Government: Most comments about leadership at the provincial level focused on three issues:

1. the inadequacy of funding,
2. the need to better coordinate services and
3. the need to involve teachers in making decisions that affect classroom practice.

Following are some of the actions that participants suggested the government could undertake to improve special education in the province:

1. provide adequate funding to jurisdictions to meet the needs of all students with special needs, including those identified as gifted and talented;
2. provide substantially more funds for staffing and resources;
3. support early intervention and full-day kindergarten;
4. ensure that funding is actually used to improve student learning; and
5. respect teachers as professionals who, given the necessary supports, have the skills to assess and develop programs for special needs students.

With respect to accountability, respondents acknowledged that students with special needs should be included in whatever accountability framework is adopted. However, many pointed out that including students with special needs in the provincial achievement testing program is, in some cases, inappropriate.

With respect to accountability, respondents acknowledged that students with special needs should be included in whatever accountability framework is adopted. However, many pointed out that including students with special needs in the provincial achievement testing program is, in some cases, inappropriate. They also observed that any report on a school's test results should mention the number of students who were unable to participate due to their special education needs. Furthermore, the government should not assume that students excused from writing achievement tests would fail to meet the acceptable standard. Participants emphasized that they want to be involved in developing a new funding and accountability framework related to teaching students with special needs. They also urged Alberta Education to work with other government departments to ensure that the services to schools are better coordinated.



“We need to continue to lobby the government to provide funding for more special education teachers and substitutes.”

—Focus group participant

“We need qualified on-site support with the time and expertise to help teachers with IPPs, special needs services and programming.”

—Survey respondent

Individual Program Plan Resources

Among the concerns that focus group participants expressed about IPPs were these: the number of IPPs required, the amount of time required to write them, the lack of assistance available to teachers in developing them, the difficulty of accessing and coordinating services outside the school, the lack of a standardized format for them, the excessive number of assessments that must be included in them and the lack of professional development to help teachers develop them.

An overwhelming number of the teachers who participated in the focus groups and the surveys indicated that they did not receive the professional development necessary to write IPPs. This was the case not only for beginning teachers (who noted that they received little information about IPPs in their teacher preparation programs) but also for more experienced teachers. Not surprisingly, respondents suggested that universities should provide more special education courses as well as mandatory preservice courses on identifying and understanding special needs, developing IPPs, referring students to specialists, assessing students with special needs, planning special needs programs, interpreting assessments from specialists, developing instructional strategies, and interpreting scores and reports. Participants also suggested that the Association should offer a session on writing IPPs at its Beginning Teachers’ Conference. Experienced teachers suggested that every school should have a designated special education

An overwhelming number of the teachers who participated in the focus groups and the surveys indicated that they did not receive the professional development necessary to write IPPs.

teacher to help teachers develop and implement IPPs. Other respondents emphasized the importance of providing all teachers with focused professional development on writing and implementing IPPs. Some respondents suggested that a coach or mentor should be hired to help teachers work through the complexities of differentiated learning and assessments. Participants suggested that school jurisdictions, the provincial government and the Association all have a role to play in offering professional development related to IPPs.

Teachers in every focus group across the province reported that they simply did not have enough time during the day to write IPPs. They lacked the time not only to meet with other teachers to discuss IPPs but also to collaborate with colleagues on developing instructional strategies for very complex learners. They also stated that they needed more time during the instructional day to assess students, meet with specialists, collaborate with other teachers, and meet with parents and teaching assistants.

Teachers also expressed concern about the sheer number of IPPs that they were required to develop. Some teachers reported that they had to develop IPPs for 10 or more students in a so-called regular classroom. They questioned whether these IPPs are really necessary and suggested that an

alternative might be available. Still others suggested that both developing an IPP and issuing a report card is redundant.

Many respondents also noted that the advice they receive about IPPs from the province and from the jurisdiction is often inconsistent and seems to depend on whom they contact. This inconsistency is also confusing for parents, particularly when they attempt to transfer a child from one jurisdiction to another jurisdiction or even from one school to another in the same jurisdiction. As mentioned earlier, respondents were also very concerned about the absence of any standards governing the process for developing and formatting IPPs. Several respondents suggested that the province should establish a standard format for IPPs and develop a resource bank of goals and objectives focusing on student strengths rather than deficits.

Teachers also expressed concern about the sheer number of IPPs that they were required to develop. Some teachers reported that they had to develop IPPs for 10 or more students in a so-called regular classroom.

Although teachers appreciated the services they received from outside specialists, they reported that these services were often difficult to access and lacked coordination. A partial solution to these problems, according to some respondents, would be to expand the Regional Educational Consulting Services. Others suggested that the province should give more weight to assessments by teachers, who, after all, are ultimately responsible for developing programs.

Recommendations

8. That Alberta Education provide sufficient funding to enable jurisdictions to reduce class sizes, thereby creating conditions that research has shown are more conducive to effective teaching and learning.
9. That Alberta Education modify its funding formula and framework to take into account the composition and complexity of the class.
10. That jurisdictions grant every teacher adequate time during the school day to prepare to teach in inclusive and diverse classrooms. The importance of such preparation time cannot be overstated.
11. That Alberta Education fund professional development programs to help teachers acquire the knowledge and skills they require to work in inclusive and highly diverse classrooms.
12. That jurisdictions, through the leadership of principals, ensure that teachers have access to professional development opportunities related to inclusive practice.
13. That Alberta Education, in collaboration with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the College of Alberta School Superintendents, develop a provincial professional development action plan targeted at supporting teachers to meet the challenges posed by changing classroom demographics.

“Provide wording exemplars and checklists. Many teachers experience difficulty in determining acceptable and appropriate vocabulary usage in IPPs.”

—Survey respondent

“Working conditions make it so difficult for teachers. I am exhausted. Teachers do not need to take this forever. ATA support is critical.”

—Focus group participant

14. That jurisdictions provide teachers with the opportunity, during the school day, to meet with colleagues to discuss instructional and assessment strategies for students who are experiencing learning challenges. Such meetings, which could be incorporated into existing professional learning community agendas, would facilitate a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of all students.
15. That Alberta Education provide jurisdictions with new targeted funding for the purpose of hiring special education teachers/resource teachers/learning support teachers and assigning them to schools in proportion to the number of students enrolled and the severity of their needs.
16. That Alberta Education establish criteria governing the knowledge, skills and experiences that teaching/educational assistants must possess in order to work with students having special needs.
17. That the Government of Alberta take measures to reduce the time that schools must wait to (a) access the assessment services provided by speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and other specialists and (b) receive reports once such assessments have been made.
18. That Alberta Education increase the number of copies of special education resources that it provides to schools.
19. That Alberta Education, in consultation with the Alberta Teachers' Association and the College of Alberta School Superintendents, develop new materials related to such aspects of inclusive practice as (a) modifying the curricula to meet the needs of students who learn at different rates and (b) developing nonstandard ways of assessing students with special needs.
20. That Alberta Education, in consultation with classroom teachers, revise the requirements for individual program plans so as to make them less time-consuming and more practical for teachers to write.

Achievement for all
Equity + ^{current} accountability
do not mesh.
Need more ways to
honour + measure learning
Alta Ed policy dev.
does not include a

PLC mo
used to
knowledge
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Preventa
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Accountability

In a document entitled *Standards for Special Education*, Alberta Education (2004) defines accountability as “the obligation to answer for the execution of one’s assigned responsibilities.” Tucker and Stronge (2005, 8) observe that the expectations for accountability often “ignore the complex interdependencies of the learning enterprise” by failing to address such questions as “accountability by whom, with what resources, and as measured by what.” Reeves (2004, 6) contends that what educators should aspire to is “holistic accountability,” a system that includes “not only academic achievement scores, but also specific information on curriculum, teaching practices and leadership practices.” Accountability often means different things to different stakeholders. The challenge is to devise a system that all stakeholders can support and that can be implemented with integrity, reliability and validity.

Student achievement should never be based on just one measurement. Using multiple assessments is especially important in the case of students with special education needs. Expecting students who have learning challenges and/or who have not been exposed to the curricula to write provincial achievement tests simply affirms the obvious: that, compared with other students, they perform below grade expectations. What is more important is how much the student has improved academically, socially and in other ways

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during the last year. Any accountability mechanism for students with special needs should set high expectations with respect to what the student will achieve, set out an objective way of determining student progress and draw upon the teacher’s own assessments. The measures of learning should take into account the student’s grade level, the content level and the student’s ability. The assessment strategies used to document student learning could include norm-referenced tests; criterion-referenced tests; authentic assessments such as portfolios, projects and writing assignments; classroom or districtwide tests; and standards-based assessments. Data for students with special needs could be analyzed on the basis of gains in student achievement scores rather than of fixed standards.

Teachers want an accountability mechanism that is student-centred and that provides meaningful feedback that helps them improve their classroom practice. In its document *Real Learning First: The Teaching Profession’s View of Student Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, the Association (2008a) outlines seven accountability principles, the first of which reads as follows: “Education partners have a shared understanding of and commitment to fairness, openness, respect for diversity and stewardship, which are key values underlying accountability in education.” Many respondents stated that provincial achievement tests violate this principle and that a much better

“Teachers should be the primary source for decision making on student success.”

—Survey respondent

“Student learning is organic, in that students learn at different rates, but this doesn’t mean all students need IPPs.”

—Focus group participant

accountability measure for students with special needs would be their IPPs. At the same time, however, they observed that, for the accountability system to be student-centred, the IPP process must be seamless from grade to grade and from teacher to teacher, and must be used to drive instruction. Because IPPs do not currently focus exclusively on learning strategies and student outcomes, they would need to be revamped before they could serve as an objective accountability measure.

Teachers are professionals. However, many teachers report that the growing demands placed on them—to test, to complete forms and reports, to attend numerous meetings and to comply with administrative mandates—have left them feeling that they have lost control of their professional practice. Many respondents also expressed concern that the procedure used to code students is based on external assessments and requirements rather than on sound professional practice. In assessing the needs of their students and developing appropriate interventions based on those assessments, teachers often

***Teachers believe in the ability of all students to learn and achieve.
To act on this belief, teachers need freedom and autonomy.***

collaborate with parents and other professionals, a process that requires a certain degree of autonomy. After interviewing a series of internationally renowned educators, Hatton (2005, 126) concluded that “in an atmosphere dominated by scripted programs and standardized testing, these educators profess the idea that the best teaching arises out of a teacher’s intellectual framework, a willingness to take risks, and the ability to remain fluid enough in response to follow the meaningful connections students make.” Teachers believe in the ability of all students to learn and achieve. To act on this belief, teachers need freedom and autonomy.

Recommendations

21. That Alberta Education, in consultation with teachers, redesign the accountability policies and practices related to students with special needs.
22. That Alberta Education and school jurisdictions reduce the administrative paperwork required of teachers working with students with special needs.
23. That Alberta Education establish accountability policies and practices that honour the complexities of teaching and that support student learning.

Conclusion

In reviewing the delivery of special education programs in the province, Alberta Education should consider modifying its approach from one that focuses on categorizing students to one that focuses on determining the supports that students require in order to learn and that teachers require in order to make that learning possible. This philosophical shift, in turn, would result in a funding framework that is more responsive to the needs of both students and their teachers. Although the funding framework should centre on programming for students, it should also take into account such factors as the number of students in each class and the severity of their needs.

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The issues with respect to the delivery of special education documented in this study are not unique to Alberta. Several provinces have reviewed their policies and funding frameworks in an effort to better respond to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. In British Columbia, for example, the tension between inclusion and segregation is evident in this introductory paragraph from the education ministry's policy manual on special education:

British Columbia promotes an inclusive education system in which students with special needs are fully participating members of a community of learners. Inclusion describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs. The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with full integration in regular classrooms and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others. (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2006, p 2)

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2008a, 2008b, 2008c) appears to be moving away from a system based on coding toward one that focuses on assessing needs and defining student outcomes. Saskatchewan has also recognized the need to provide special education teachers with professional development. Accordingly, it has implemented a plan whereby special education teachers can work with a mentor, join a teacher network, attend workshops and participate in electronic discussion groups. Saskatchewan is also examining the prospect of establishing a provincial electronic personal program plan, that province's equivalent to Alberta's individual program plans.

In 2002, Manitoba's Commission on Class Size and Composition concluded that class composition is as important as, if not more important than, class

“Class size and composition supports need to be in place to match the diversity of students’ needs.”

—Focus group participant

“It would be great if a government official would show up at my school to help me feel like I am making a difference. Support comes in many forms including funding, time and verbal support.”

—Focus group participant

size (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth 2002). The commission also noted that addressing concerns about class composition is often more difficult than simply reducing class size. In a 2006 report on special education, the Ontario Ministry of Education addressed such familiar concerns as improving student access to the curriculum, increasing the professional development available to teachers, improving strategies for identifying students with special needs, improving the integration of services, ensuring that parents are involved, modifying the accountability framework to take into account the circumstances of students with special needs, undertaking more research and modifying the way funding is allocated. In 2006, the New Brunswick Department of Education undertook a comprehensive review of

A revised framework for special education must take into account the needs of local communities. At the same time, it must be consistent across the province with respect to such matters as funding, class size, classroom composition and teacher preparation time.

inclusive education in that province. In the process, it developed a policy statement on inclusion, came up with a working definition of an exceptional student, implemented a new service delivery model, revised its standards and accountability framework, and proposed a new funding model.

Although they may arrive at different solutions, education ministries across the country are all clearly striving to come up with funding frameworks that recognize the complexity of special education.

A revised framework for special education must take into account the needs of local communities. At the same time, it must be consistent across the province with respect to such matters as funding, class size, classroom composition and teacher preparation time. As the special education review gets under way, Alberta teachers look forward to discussing with the government such issues as funding, policy development and accountability.



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"The annual global cost of training a soldier is 56 times greater than educating a child."

—Rodrigo Rojas

“No pessimist ever discovered the secrets of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new heaven to the human spirit.”

—Helen Keller

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"Every time you stand up for an ideal, you send forth a tiny ripple of hope."

—Robert Kennedy



“A vision is not just a picture of what could be; it is an appeal to our better selves, a call to become something more.”

—Rosabeth Moss Kanter



“If equity means treating all people fairly, we need to ensure that trained professionals are teaching students with exceptional needs; otherwise, how fair are we being to the students who may need our help the most? What have the educational services in this province been doing to mend these inequalities? At the core of all the concerns educators have in this province is the lack of supports for students. Our goal is to build a better future for all our students. Now is the time to make changes that ensure all students have equal rights.”

—Focus group participant



A Vision for Public Education

Public education allows professional, highly educated teachers to provide students with a broad range of learning experiences in addition to the basic subjects of language arts, science, math and social studies. Public education presents students with opportunities to develop ingenuity, creativity, critical-thinking skills and a strong sense of citizenship.

Public education is the cornerstone of democracy. It must be founded on a commitment to educate all children well. Public education must foster and support the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child.

Public education must be

- free and accessible to every child;
- delivered by certificated, highly skilled and knowledgeable teaching professionals;
- appropriately funded to ensure that every child learns, every child succeeds; and
- a responsibility shared by all Albertans.

Alberta's teachers believe

all students can succeed.

Public education provides students from all backgrounds with learning experiences to discover and develop their potential, their passions and their gifts, allowing them to make significant contributions to their communities.

The mission of public education is to develop

- a foundation of learning that enables students to function effectively in work, further learning and life;
- the potential and gifts of each child; and
- citizens of a democratic society.

Excerpts from the ATA's *Vision and Mission for Public Education*



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