

Common Threads for Inclusive Education



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Parent Collaboration

PLANNING YOUR LEARNING

How can I provide culturally appropriate and meaningful opportunities for parents or guardians as partners in education to support student learning in an inclusive learning environment?

FIRST STEPS

Alberta teachers are committed to creating an inclusive education system that inspires and enables all students to achieve success and fulfillment. Parents and families play an important role in shaping the way their children view learning.¹ The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) recognizes the importance of positive and productive parent-teacher relationships in successful teaching. Teachers and parents share a common interest in supporting student learning. Parents' insights about how their children learn and process information are useful for teachers. Teachers welcome parents as partners in learning by creating conditions where parents act as advisors and collaborators in student learning (ATA 2019).

The *Teaching Quality Standard* requires teachers to establish inclusive learning environments in which diversity is respected and all members of the school community are welcomed, cared for, respected and safe. This is promoted by building positive and productive relationships with students, parents, and other teachers and professionals in the school and local community to support student learning (Alberta Education 2018).

When parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around the students and begins its work.

—Joyce L. Epstein,
School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share



Epstein's Six Types of Parent Involvement

1. Parenting
2. Communicating
3. Volunteering
4. Learning at home
5. Decision making
6. Collaborating with the community (Epstein 2019, 16)





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Teachers and parents mutually benefit from developing an open dialogue and relationship with each other to ensure the child's success in the classroom.

FOSTERING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Increasing parent engagement across the school environment can create additional opportunities for collaboration.

Teachers invite, facilitate and nurture parent communication and involvement. Relationships with parents, as with students, are grounded in respect, honesty, mutual support and trust. Being the parent of a child with diverse learning needs is often challenging. Parents and families often experience misunderstanding and judgment within the greater community and may initially be fearful and distrustful of working with the school. In inclusive learning classrooms, teachers working together with parents and families weave the often complex threads of students' academic, social and emotional development strengths and needs to foster success.

Ongoing Communication—Helpful Considerations

- Make regular and brief positive phone calls at the beginning of the year and when students demonstrate a positive behaviour, complete a challenging task or show improvement.
- Choose a format for routine, predictable, ongoing communication that best suits your teaching environment: classroom journal, class letter, e-newsletters, progress reports, notes, apps (for example, Remind, Seesaw), Google Classroom and class websites.
- Develop a plan to document the date and key points of all parent communications (both phone calls and informal conversations), and keep copies of e-mails.
- Consider the most effective way to communicate with parents (that is, face to face, phone) and if written material needs to be translated into another language.

Meet-the-Staff Night

Most school jurisdictions have an initial meeting night at the beginning of the school year. Depending on jurisdiction expectations, these meetings may be formal or informal. This is usually the parents' first opportunity to visit the school and meet the teacher. The teacher's goal for this event is to engage parents as partners in the learning process. Introduce yourself, the curriculum and classroom procedures.

Encourage parent-teacher collaboration by

- sharing examples of how parents can support their child's learning out of school;
- confirming accurate home contact information; and
- informing parents of when, where and how you can be reached (that is, school e-mail and phone numbers).

Parent-Teacher Conferences

This is a time to encourage parents and families to meet with you about student learning and to establish a foundation for collaboration. Try to ensure that all parents have scheduled an interview. The checklist below can help you plan for a successful conference.

Before

- Establish a comfortable atmosphere.
- Arrange informal seating around a table. Display student work.
- Ensure privacy; the meeting space should not be visible from the hallway.
- Compile material to substantiate your assessment; collect dated samples of student work throughout the term.
- Review the student record.
- If you feel that a student needs additional supports and services, such as an instructional support plan (ISP)/individual program plan (IPP), speech and language, educational testing, behavioural support or medical services, meet with the school team to get guidance on how to proceed.²
- Parents should not be surprised by information shared at a parent-teacher conference; serious concerns about a child's learning warrant early parent contact by phone or private meeting.
- Post appointments outside the door and keep to the schedule; rebook with parents who need additional time.
- Make a note of the points you want to cover regarding individual students.
- Understand the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP). Ask the principal for clarification as required.³

During

- Introduce yourself in a friendly manner; keep opening comments to a minimum.
- Maintain the focus of the discussion.
- Be clear and concise in your comments. Be an attentive listener.
- Share the students' learning successes and needs.
- Demonstrate that you care about your students and enjoy teaching them.
- Encourage parents to share pertinent information.
- Ask for input to develop the students' ongoing learning goals.
- If at any time you feel that you need additional support, excuse yourself from the conference and get assistance from school leadership.

Concluding

- Highlight the conclusions and agreed-on actions. Make notes for your files.
- Set another date for an additional interview if necessary.
- Ensure that parents have a clear understanding of what was discussed.
- End as you begin—on a positive note.
- Identify a mutually agreed-on time to connect again to provide an update.
- If necessary, keep your principal and other support personnel informed.
- Some students will need regularly scheduled achievement conferences. A meeting planner can provide a consistent format.⁴



Telling Parents Their Child Is Struggling in School

Teachers may need to have difficult conversations with parents about their student's learning. Trust yourself and what you know.

A Potential "Script"

Teacher says: "Your child appears to be struggling in class. I would like to have a conversation about learning. Would that be OK?" Teacher asks permission to have a conversation.

Teacher says: "It may be that the child is struggling with _____." Give specific examples of paying attention in school; for example, "Child not able to follow two-step instruction and struggles with organization." Teacher wonders if the parents notice this at home.

Teacher wonders what has happened in the past at school and home settings, and asks what the parents have heard from previous teachers and if the parents can share their successful home strategies.



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Teachers must attain informed consent when a student requires an IPP/ISP. Parents are invited and encouraged to be involved in creating the plan and to submit changes or additions when they may be necessary.

Individualized Program Plans/Instructional Support Plans

Individualized program plans (IPPs)/Instructional support plans (ISPs) are required for all students who are on an adapted or modified program. Alberta Education requires that the parents provide informed consent for students' individualized program plans and that they understand

- the purpose and nature of the program plan,
- likely benefits and risks,
- the likely consequences of nonaction,
- alternatives,
- the option to refuse or withdraw at any time and
- how to rescind consent if desired (Alberta Education 2007).

Actively involve parents in the IPP/ISP process by creating a draft IPP/ISP and inviting input from the students' parents. Make changes or additions with their input. Provide a copy of the IPP/ISP to facilitate their support at home. Discuss how and when parents will be informed of the students' progress.⁵



“Adapted programming” means programming that retains the learning outcomes of the Program of Studies and where adjustments to the instructional process are provided to address the special education needs of the student. **“Modified programming”** means programming in which the learning outcomes are significantly different from the provincial curriculum and are specifically selected to meet the student's special education needs.

- Alberta Education. 2007. Information Bulletin on the Standards for Special Education.

Parent Readiness

Increasing parent engagement across the school environment can create additional opportunities for collaboration. You might want to consider the following strategies for parent engagement:

- Offer a variety of volunteer opportunities, such as extracurricular activities, field trips, cultural experiences and land-based learning, and school material preparation or distribution.
- Provide child care for school events and celebrations.
- Offer regular school and classroom family activities (for example, tea and bannock with the principal; literacy and numeracy events; First Nations, Métis and Inuit family nights).
- Talk to your principal about holding a meeting in the community for parents who are not able to come to the school (that is, friendship centre or community hall).

Some parents may have personal experiences or challenges that limit their capacity for collaboration. Recognize that not all parents are ready or able to engage and may need additional supports and encouragement. If required, encourage parents to bring a support person to a school meeting. The following may be a parent's reality:

- Lack of trust in the education system
- Limited access to technology
- Complicated work schedule
- Lack of access to child care
- Lack of transportation
- Limited English/French language skills
- Limited knowledge of education system, curricular outcomes and so on
- Personal or intergenerational trauma



Making parent meetings more accessible and enticing will increase engagement and commitment to their child's learning.

A teacher's greatest gift is the capacity to view the students as who they are becoming, not who they are.

NEXT STEPS

Successful collaboration exists because teachers and school communities create environments where parents can make positive, meaningful contributions to the learning process. Continue to reflect on and enhance your own collaborative practice. Share ideas with your colleagues, encourage others, celebrate your connections with families, and ask for support and help from your school community. Be organized, set communication goals and boundaries, and put your own routines in place. A teacher's greatest gift is the capacity to view the students as who they are becoming, not who they are. The most important aspect a teacher can bring to families, especially in difficult times, is a hopeful vision for their child.

CONTINUING YOUR LEARNING

How does the *FOIP Act* inform your collaboration with parents? What information and images can be shared publicly? What information can be requested?

How do you actively promote parent collaboration in student learning while maintaining a balance in your work and home life? What appropriate limits have you established for communication with parents?

What personal strengths and gifts do you bring to your collaboration with parents? How do you demonstrate acceptance and respect for diversity?

How does this new learning help you to better understand parents' diverse perspectives, for example, poverty, culture and intergenerational trauma?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Alberta Education. 2010. *Making a Difference: Meeting Diverse Learning Needs with Differentiated Instruction*. https://education.alberta.ca/media/384968/makingadifference_2010.pdf (accessed April 29, 2020).
- . 2006. *Individualized Program Planning IPP (ECS to Grade 12)*. <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/0778542920> (accessed April 29, 2020).
- Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). nd. "Inclusive Education." ATA website. www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Inclusive-Education/Pages/default.aspx (accessed April 29, 2020).
- Council for Inclusive Education (CIE), ATA. nd. "Teaching Resources." CIE website. www.cieducation.ca/teaching-resources (accessed April 29, 2020).

NOTES

1. "My Child's Learning: A Parent Resource," Alberta Education, www.learnalberta.ca/content/mychildslearning/ (accessed March 17, 2020).
2. An example is available at www.learnalberta.ca/content/kes/pdf/or_ws_tea_ld_b_01_ipp.pdf (accessed March 17, 2020).
3. More information is available at www.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Volume%2033/Number%2015/In%20the%20News/Pages/What%20you%20should%20know%20about%20the%20FOIP%20Act.aspx (accessed March 17, 2020).
4. See Alberta Education's (2006) "Sample Planner for Solution-Focused Meeting" at <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/ab22ff64-3358-4387-9761-8c58878a6b84/resource/2fc88db2-621f-4fd6-b4a1-bfa852ad6fe6> (accessed March 17, 2020).
5. More information is available at www.learnalberta.ca/content/kes/pdf/or_ws_tea_ld_b_01_ipp.pdf (accessed March 17, 2020).

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- Alberta Education. 2018. *Teaching Quality Standard*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education. Also available at https://education.alberta.ca/media/3739620/standardsdoc-tqs_fa-web-2018-01-17.pdf (accessed March 17, 2020).
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- . 2006. "Sample Planner for Solution-Focused Meeting." *Individualized Program Planning (IPP): ECS to Grade 12*. Edmonton, Alta: Alberta Education. Also available at <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/ab22ff64-3358-4387-9761-8c58878a6b84/resource/2fc88db2-621f-4fd6-b4a1-bfa852ad6fe6> (accessed March 17, 2020).
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- Epstein, J L. 2019. "School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share." In *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, ed J L Epstein and Associates, p 11. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.

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Common Threads for Inclusive Education is a publication of the Alberta Teachers' Association intended to support certificated teachers on their learning journey to inclusive education competency.

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