Handbook for Parents of Children with Exceptionalities





Education and Early Childhood Development

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Introduction

Parents are important members of their child's educational team. As advocates, parents support their children as they go through school, working with teachers and administrators to ensure their child meets his or her potential. This handbook aims to support parents of students with an exceptionality to participate fully in the process of planning their child's educational program.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development uses the term exceptionality to identify patterns of strengths and needs common to groups of students. These strengths and needs may be: cognitive, emotional, behavioural, medical, social, and physical. A student with an exceptionality may require student support services to meet their learning potential. A student with an exceptionality may access a range of school based services depending on his or her strengths and needs. These services are provided through the Service Delivery Team at your school.

A goal of this handbook is to explain the educational services available to meet the needs of a student with an exceptionality. It will provide information to help prepare parents and students for meetings so that they can make informed decisions and successful transitions. This handbook is an informal resource for parents and is not intended to be a legal document. Key terms are bolded the first time they appear. These terms are defined in the Glossary of Key Terms beginning on page 12 of the handbook. Throughout this handbook, the term parent is used in reference to both parents and guardians.

Identification

Teachers respond to individual student needs with a variety of good teaching strategies. When these classroom-based strategies do not sufficiently address the student's needs, the teacher will contact the parent to initiate the **pre-referral process**.

The pre-referral process is a collaborative, informal assessment practice. Parents, teachers and **special educators** discuss the student's strengths and needs and suggest short-term **strategies** which may enable the student to be successful in meeting **prescribed curriculum**. Its goal is to determine which strategies enable the student to be successful, which are not effective, and which may be necessary long-term. The parent will be updated regularly by the teacher on the effectiveness of strategies tried. If strategies tried are unsuccessful, or appear to be necessary long-term, the teacher will make a referral to the **service delivery team**. The will review the student's progress and make recommendations. These recommendations may be additional learning strategies or the team may recommend a referral for a **comprehensive assessment**. If a comprehensive assessment is recommended, the student's teacher will explain this process to the parent and ask for signed consent.

The goal of a comprehensive assessment is to inform programming, to determine student strengths and needs and to identify an exceptionality if it exists. In order to receive special education a student must have an identified exceptionality, as defined by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The following exceptionalities are recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development:

- acquired brain injury
- developmental delay
- gifted and talented
- hearing loss
- intellectual disability
- medical condition
- mental illness/mental health
- neurodevelopmental and related disorders
- physical disability
- specific learning disorder
- speech and/or language disorder
- vision loss

The Program Planning Team

A program planning team may be initiated for a student with an exceptionality if the student is having difficulty with his or her school work, or if the student is not sufficiently challenged by his or her school work. The program planning team will review the student's strengths and needs, as determined through both **formal and informal assessment**. Based on this discussion, the team will determine if changes to the student's programming is recommended. Possible changes to programming are:

- accommodations
- modified prescribed course
- alternate program
- alternate course
- alternate (functional) curriculum

One or more of these programming options may be an alternative for the student. These are discussed in further detail later in the handbook. Programming changes must be documented in the student's **Individual Education Plan (IEP)**.

Parent involvement is essential to the program planning process. Therefore, parents will be part of the program planning team along with classroom/subject teachers. The student may also be on the program planning team. This will depend on the student's age and developmental level. Other members may include:

- guidance counsellor
- educational psychologist
- instructional resource teacher
- administration
- other education professionals (such as visual or hearing itinerant, speechlanguage pathologist, etc.) as required

The program planning team meets at least annually, or as needed, to make programming decisions which are based on the student's strengths and needs, and assessment results. The role of the program planning team is to:

- identify the student's strengths and needs
- make decisions regarding programming including accommodations, a modified prescribed course, an alternate program, an alternate course, or alternate (functional) curriculum. The setting(s) for delivery, personnel responsible, and instructional strategies
- generate the IEP to summarize the decisions made concerning the student's programming
- annually review the student's files to ensure that programming is appropriate and attainable
- decide whether school-based services are required and, if so, what services are required
- direct team members to make referrals to appropriate professionals outside of the educational system
- designate a contact teacher responsible for contacting team members to arrange meetings and to act as the first point of contact regarding programming.

The Parents' Role on the Program Planning Team

Parents are a vital part of a program planning team. As informed and contributing members of the program planning team, parents:

- attend scheduled meetings
- share in decisions that affect their child's education.
- give written and informed consent for any individualized formal assessments
- provide relevant and clear information that could affect the student's learning and behaviour at school
- follow through with recommendations made by the program planning team
- advocate on behalf of the student
- support learning at home
- consider the point of view of all team members
- ask guestions if information is unclear

Parents may choose to bring a support person (family member, friend, another professional working with the student) to a program planning team meeting. The school should be notified of this in advance.

What to Expect at a Program Planning Team Meeting

A productive program planning team meeting can often be achieved within a 45 to 60 minute timeframe. The meeting will:

- review student's strengths and needs
- discuss student-specific goals
- review roles and responsibilities
- identify necessary accommodations
- plan for transitions
- set a date for review
- determine where outcomes will be taught

Effective Program Planning Team Meetings

Parents can consider the following points before, during, and after the meeting.

Prior to the meeting

- Will your child be involved in the meeting? What role will he or she have? Is this in his or her best interest? (The classroom teacher may assist the parent with this decision.)
- Draft a list of questions and concerns for discussion.

At the meeting

- Share your present and future goals for your child.
- Share any home situations that may impact your child's performance and behaviour at school.
- Share updates from outside agencies.
- Find out how you can support your child's learning at home.
- Ask questions to ensure your understanding of your child's program and progress.
- Verbally summarize your understanding of the decisions made.

After the meeting

- Discuss programming decisions with your child and explain how individuals will support the plan.
- Follow-up with any responsibilities that were assigned to you.

Programming Supports

In an inclusive school, a continuum of supports and services is offered in the most appropriate setting (large group, small group, individualized) respecting the dignity of the child. With this in mind, the program planning team will determine appropriate programming and required services to meet your child's individual needs. A student's individual program may include one or more of these programming options:

- accommodations
- modified course(s)
- alternate program(s)
- alternate course(s)
- alternate (functional) curriculum

One or more of the following personnel may provide direct service to support a student's program:

- instructional resource teacher
- quidance counsellor
- speech-language pathologist
- vision itinerant
- hearing itinerant
- behaviour itinerant
- student assistant

Other support services may include alternate transportation or medical services.

Placement decisions, made by the program planning team, are based on the programming needs of your child. For some learning outcomes a student's optimal learning environment may be in the regular classroom, for others the student may require an alternate setting. Decisions related to the placement of a student are best made on an individual basis. When considering placement decisions, the program planning team will determine the most inclusive, least restrictive environment which will allow meaningful and purposeful learning to occur, while respecting your child's dignity.



Accommodations

In order for a student with an exceptionality to meet his or her learning potential, specific accommodations may be required. This would include gifted and talented students who require advanced learning opportunities. The decision to provide an accommodation is made by the program planning team, and documented on the Record of Accommodations, which is then attached to the IEP cover sheet.

A student may receive accommodations throughout all areas of studies whether prescribed, modified prescribed or alternate.

For students who require only accommodations, (and not modified prescribed or alternate programming), his or her program planning team may consist of only the teacher and parent. An **instructional resource teacher** is available to conference with the classroom teacher regarding the accommodations. The student's file will be reviewed by the **contact teacher** identified on the Record of Accommodations at least annually, to ensure that the student is meeting with success. The IEP form is not required for a student receiving accommodations only. The Record of Accommodations will be placed in the student's **Cumulative File**.

Accommodations for public exams are guided by regulations outlined by High School Certification (see Public Examinations Accommodations and Adaptations Policy online at:

www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/publications/accommodationpolicy.pdf.

Students accessing accommodations are expected to participate in **Provincial Assessments**. Exemptions and accommodations may be granted on an individual basis as determined by the Division of Research and Evaluation regulations. For additional information on provincial assessments, please visit www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/evaluation/crts/index.html.

Modified Prescribed Courses

A modified prescribed course is the prescribed curriculum, with no more than 50% of the course outcomes changed, deleted, added or extended. A modified prescribed course may be necessary to meet the needs of a student with a cognitive disorder or gifted and talented exceptionality. There are cases where a modified prescribed course is appropriate for students with a specific learning disorder, acquired brain injury or mental illness/mental health exceptionality. If the student is capable of achieving at least 50% in the provincially prescribed course without modification, then the course should not be modified downward.

For students performing below grade level expectations, the decision to modify prescribed curriculum outcomes requires considerable thought on the part of the program planning team. A modified prescribed course may significantly affect the student's eligibility for high school graduation or post-secondary programs.

Before modifying a prescribed course downward, the program planning team must ensure that all other means of supporting the student have been explored, exhausted, and documented. They must also be sure that the proposed modified prescribed course is in line with assessment data.



Alternate Programs and Courses

The program planning team determines whether an individualized alternate program or course is required for a student with an exceptionality. The teaching or re-teaching of prescribed curriculum outcomes is not considered an alternate program or course. An alternate program or course is only developed when:

- accommodations alone are not sufficient to address the student's learning needs
- no corresponding programming exists within the prescribed curriculum
- a modified prescribed course will not sufficiently address the student's learning needs

An alternate program can be one of two types:

- 1. prerequisite programs which teach specific foundational skills that are necessary for the student to be able to complete the prescribed current grade curriculum.
- non-curricular programs which teach non-academic skills that support school success. These skills are necessary for the student to complete the prescribed curriculum

Depending on the topic, student need, and available resources, the timeframe for an alternate program will vary. For example, one program may be offered for 15 minutes per day over a three month period. Another may be offered for 30 minutes per day for 1 or 2 weeks. Timeframes will be determined by the program planning team. Alternate programs are not eligible for credit.

An alternate course replaces a prescribed subject area or high school level course. The time requirement for the alternate course is equal to that of the course/subject that it is replacing. An alternate course at the high school level must be 55 hours (1 credit) or 110 hours (2 credits). An alternate course can be one of two types:

- 1. A curricular altering course meets the academic needs of the student in a subject area, at a level that is significantly different from the prescribed curriculum at the student's grade level. This would include students with a cognitive disorder who are unsuccessful on the modified prescribed curriculum, as well as students who are gifted and talented who require above grade level outcomes.
- 2. A non-curricular course includes outcomes that develop skills necessary for successful daily life. Such courses are reserved for students with cognitive disorders who do not meet the criteria for alternate (functional) curriculum but require mostly life skills programming. Life skills-based courses are not eligible for high school credit. This is the only instance in which non-curricular is considered a course.

When it has been demonstrated that optimal learning cannot occur in the regular classroom, an alternate setting may be appropriate. The student may return to the classroom for some academic outcomes, or to address other, non-academic IEP outcomes. When all or part of the instruction occurs in the classroom, responsibility will be assigned to both the classroom/subject teacher and the instructional resource teacher. The instructional resource teacher takes the lead in the development and evaluation of the alternate program or course and the classroom/subject teacher collaborates regarding delivery.

Alternate (Functional) Curriculum

Students who have been identified as having an intellectual disability, as defined by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development exceptionality, require an alternate (functional) curriculum. This is evaluated through the comprehensive assessment process. Reassessment is required every five years to ensure that this is still a valid programming choice.

An alternate (functional) curriculum consists of programming in the following four domains:

- career development
- personal development
- independent living
- functional academics.

A student who accesses an alternate (functional) curriculum will not receive high school credits. The instructional resource teacher takes the lead in the development and evaluation of alternate (functional) curriculum. Some outcomes will be delivered within an inclusive classroom.

Planning for Transitions

A number of significant transitions occur in the life of a student, such as:

- entry into a Kinderstart program
- enrolment into Kindergarten
- movement from grade to grade, level to level and school to school
- enrolment in a post-secondary institution
- movement from school to work/community.

Students with an exceptionality may have greater difficulty managing changes in their lives. Successful transitions require planning well in advance of the actual move. School personnel respond to the needs of students at each transition point by engaging in a planning process. A written record of transition planning, including goals and strategies, should be included in an IEP as part of the student's program plan. Transition planning supports students in:

- meeting with academic success
- engaging in appropriate and effective programming
- establishing social and emotional networks
- accessing required services (alternate transportation, assistive technology, etc.)
- obtaining entry into an appropriate post-secondary institution
- obtaining appropriate employment opportunities
- having positive community living outcomes

Summary

The Handbook for Parents of Children with Exceptionalities was developed to share important information with parents on the program planning process for students with exceptionalities. Parents are often the best educational advocates for their children. Parents can make positive contributions to educational planning by working closely with education professionals. This collaborative effort allows for a consistent, coordinated and holistic approach to service delivery. Additionally, it ensures that parents and educators have open communication regarding their child's strengths and needs, educational goals and services.

Parents requiring additional information on program planning should contact their child's school. Information is also available on the Division of Student Support Services website at www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/index.html



Appendices

- A. Glossary of Key Terms
- B. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Information & Publications
- C. Provincial Parent Support Groups
- D. Contact Information

A. Glossary of Key Terms

- **Accommodations:** adaptations to the learning environment which address particular student strengths and needs. These may include physical arrangements, assistive technology, particular instructional strategies and others. Such accommodations are available for students with exceptionalities in all areas of study whether prescribed, modified prescribed, or alternate.
- Acquired Brain Injury: an exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This would include concussions that significantly impact functioning. Student illnesses such as meningitis, stroke and traumatic brain injury must affect the educational performance. The student must be diagnosed by a health care professional.
- Alternate (Functional) Curriculum: consists of programming in the following four domains: career development, personal development, independent living and functional academics. Students who require a functional curriculum are identified as having moderate, severe or profound impairments in cognition and severe deficits in adaptive functioning as evaluated through the comprehensive assessment process.
- Alternate Course: A course that replaces a prescribed subject area or high school level course. An alternate course can be curricular (curriculum significantly different from the student's current grade level) or non-curricular (outcomes that support student skill development).
- Alternate Program: A program which is shorter in frequency and/or duration than an alternate course. An alternate program can be prerequisite (foundational skill outcomes required for current grade level curriculum) or non-curricular (outcomes that support skill-based programming).
- Alternate Transportation: Transportation available to students who for medical/ exceptional reasons are unable to use regular transportation, or reside within a 1.6 km from the school and have a medical/exceptional reason preventing them from walking to school, and Kindergarten to Grade 6 students who reside within a 1.6 km whose parent/guardian cannot accompany their child to school because of a physical disability.
- Comprehensive Assessment: A comprehensive assessment informs program planning team decisions. The purpose of a comprehensive assessment is to answer the referral question in a valid and reliable manner; determine or confirm whether a student's difficulties are the result of an exceptionality, and provide clarity on how a student's exceptionality impacts programming.

- Contact Teacher: The teacher responsible for contacting team members to arrange meetings and to act as the first point of contact regarding programming. The contact teacher will also ensure that copies of necessary documentation are collated, reviewed with parents/guardians, signed, distributed and the original document placed in the cumulative file.
- **Cumulative File:** A file where student records, such as report cards, are stored.
- **Developmental Delay:** An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Developmental delay refers only to children between the ages of 0 and 8 years. It is a main area of exceptionality when the cause of a child's developmental lag is unknown.
- Exceptionality: A term used by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to identify patterns of strengths and needs common to groups of students.
- **Formal Assessment:** Assessment data obtained through the use of standardized measures.
- Gifted and Talented: An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Students who are gifted and talented demonstrate, or have the potential to demonstrate, exceptionally high capability with respect to an exceptional ability to learn, create or perform. Students have well above average cognitive ability globally or within a specific domain (academic or non academic). Gifted and talented behaviours may be dynamic. They may also coexist with another exceptionality.
- Hearing Loss: An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Students with hearing loss ranging from mild to profound may require special education support including technological assistance and/or adaptations to teaching strategies and environmental arrangements.
- **Individual Education Plan (IEP):** A document that records and tracks the educational supports and services provided to a student. An IEP is required for students with identified exceptionalities who are receiving modified prescribed courses and/or alternate programs, courses and curriculum.
- **Informal Assessment:** Assessment data obtained through performance based measures. This would include measures such as teacher observations, checklists, portfolios and reading records.
- **Instructional Resource Teachers:** Education professionals also referred to as Special Education Teachers.

- **Intellectual Disability:** The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recognizes the criteria for intellectual disability as published in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).
- **Medical Condition:** An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. These are medical conditions (not specified elsewhere) that adversely affect a student's educational performance. Examples would include mild concussion, seizures not explained by another disorder, a heart condition, hemophilia, cancer and cystic fibrosis. The condition must affect the student's educational performance.
- Mental Illness/Mental Health: An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The following conditions are examples of mental illness and mental health conditions:
 - Psychiatric conditions such as Adjustment Disorder, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Personality Disorders, Addictions, and Eating and Feeding Disorders as outlined in the DSM-5.
 - Other mental health conditions resulting from situations such as family or personal turmoil.

The disorder must affect the student's educational performance and be diagnosed by a health care professional.

- **Modified Prescribed Course:** A course that maintains the intent of the provincially prescribed curriculum. However, specific course outcomes are changed, deleted, added or extended.
- **Neurodevelopmental and Related Disorders:** An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The following conditions are examples of neurodevelopmental and related disorders.
 - Medical and psychiatric conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum
 Disorder (FASD) and other toxic prenatal exposures, Attention Deficit
 Hyperactivity Disorder, Motor Disorders, including Tourette's and Tic
 Disorders and Acquired Movement Disorders, Neurocognitive Disorders,
 Autism Spectrum Disorder, Sensory Processing Disorder and Non-verbal
 Learning Disability.

The disorder must affect the student's educational performance and must be diagnosed by a health care professional. The exception is a Non-Verbal Learning Disability.

- Physical Disability: An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Students with a physical disability have an acquired or congenital physical and/or motor impairment such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, developmental coordination disorder, amputations, genetic disorders, etc. The disability may interfere with the development or function of the bones, muscles, joints and central nervous system. Physical characteristics may include paralysis, altered muscle tone, an unsteady gait, loss of, or inability to use, one or more limbs, difficulty with grossmotor skills such as walking or running and difficulty with fine-motor skills such as buttoning clothing or printing/writing. The impairment may range from mild to severe, may have minimal impact on the student or interfere substantially with functional ability. The effects of the disability may be minimized through appropriate environmental adaptations and/or the use of assistive devices.
- Pre-referral Process: A period of problem solving at the classroom level. The focus is to gain a better understanding of the student's strengths and needs in order to plan instruction. It is an opportunity to use knowledge of the student to introduce strategies and practices which may enable the student to have his or her strengths and needs met within the provincial curriculum.
- Prescribed Curriculum: The education plan for the majority of students is the provincially prescribed curriculum. This is the first option for all students. It includes all of those courses prescribed and approved by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and listed in the Program of Studies. The Program of Studies gives a brief description of the school programs, Kindergarten through Grade 12. It also identifies authorized learning resources for each course.
- **Provincial Assessments:** Provincial assessments are based on the provincial curriculum and provide a common standard to assess a student's proficiency in a specific subject area.
- **Service Delivery Team:** This team meets at least every two weeks to review and direct special education services in the school.
- **Special Educators:** Education professionals also referred to as Instructional Resource Teachers.
- **Specific Learning Disorder:** The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development recognizes the criteria for Specific Learning Disorder as published in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).
- **Speech and/or Language Disorder:** An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This category includes mild to moderate speech disorders and moderate to severe language disorders. Speech and/or language disorder must be diagnosed by a speech- language pathologist.

- **Strategies:** Teaching strategies which may enable the student to have his or her strengths and needs met within the provincial curriculum.
- **Student Support Services:** Services that may be provided at the school level to support students with an identified exceptionality.
- Vision Loss: An exceptionality recognized by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Students with vision loss ranging from mild to severe may require supports including technological assistance, and/or adaptations to teaching strategies and environmental arrangements. Students who have a moderate/severe vision loss and meet the following criteria are eligible for the services of the itinerant teacher: Visual acuity of 20/70 or less in the better eye after correction or a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

B. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Information & Publications

Website Information

Topic: Alternate Format of Materials

Link: https://cmaf.gov.nl.ca/

Topic: Applications for Services

Link: www.gov.nl.ca/edu/forms/studentsupport/applications.html

Topic: Assistive Technology

Link: www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/assistive tech.html

Topic: Disabilities, Exceptionalities and Services

Link: www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/exceptionalities.html

Topic: Service Delivery Model for Students with Exceptionalities Forms

Link: www.gov.nl.ca/edu/forms/studentsupport/sdmodel.html

Topic: Service Delivery Model Online Learning Site

Link: www.cdli.ca/sdm/

Publications

Publication: Important Information if Your Child has an Exceptionality

Link: www.cdli.ca/sdm/execptionalities-pamphlet-en.html

Publication: Inclusive Education

Link: www.cdli.ca/sdm/inclusion-pamphlet-(english).html www.cdli.ca/sdm/inclusion-pamphlet-(french).html

Publication: Alternate Transportation and Application Package

Link: www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/busing/GovernmentGuidelinesSpecialNeedsTransportation.pdf

Publication: Your Child has Hearing Loss?

Link: www.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/studentsupportservices/publications/dhh brochure.pdf

C. Provincial Parent Groups

This listing is just a sample of provincial groups that offer support and services to parents of children with special needs. Some of these groups will have local chapters. Check web sites for more information and links to other groups.

- NL Association of Community Living
- Autism Society of NL
- CNIB
- NL Down Syndrome Society
- Learning Disabilities Association of NL
- NL Home and School Federation
- Independent Living Resource Centre
- NL Association of the Deaf
- NL Brain Injury Association
- NL Federation of School Councils
- Mental Health Crisis Line 1-888-737-4668
- Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities (HRLE)
- Community Youth Network (check with them for community services list)
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- People First
- Our Children First Coalition
- Canadian Hard of Hearing Association of NL
- Canadian Parents for French
- Canadian Paraplegic Association
- Candelighters Association of NL
- Cerebral Palsy Association of NL

To find local associations and groups in your community, talk with other parents, school staff, and community and health service providers.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

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Location – 3rd floor, West Block, Confederation Building

NLESD Central Regional Office

203 Elizabeth Drive Gander, NL A1V 1H6

Phone – 256-2547 Fax – 651-3044

www.nlesd.ca

Conseil scolaire francophone

(French School Board) 65, chemin Ridge Suite 212 St. John's, NL A1B 4P5

Phone – 722-6324 Fax – 722-6325

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NLESD Labrador Regional Office P.O. Box 1810, Station "B"

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