

Parent and School Partnerships Making it work



**A resource for parents of children with
developmental disabilities**



Yellowknife Association for Community Living - March 2008

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Introduction

As parents we're always working to ensure the best quality of life for our children. We want them to be welcomed, to belong and to participate in all aspects of school and community life. As parents we know our child's unique and individual needs as well as their strengths. The knowledge and the skills we've developed on behalf of our children is invaluable. You're the most important resource your child has, and you're also a valuable resource to everyone who comes in contact with your child.

We have learned that cooperation works better than confrontation in establishing effective partnerships between parents and educational staff. To participate confidently and knowledgeably in planning our children's education we need to be informed. This handbook is a tool to assist you in understanding educational issues, structures and to provide information that can help you advocate for your child.

The Yellowknife Association for Community Living would like to acknowledge and thank the British Columbia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island Community Living Associations for all the assistance they have provided. Much of the information in this handbook was adapted to the NWT from their parent handbooks.

Who is this handbook for?

This handbook is for parents raising school aged children and youth with developmental disabilities. As the parent of a son or daughter with special needs who attends school, you may have questions about the school system, how to secure the support your child needs at school, who does what at school, or what to do if a problem related to your child's education arises.

This handbook will help you work within the school system and support your child's opportunities to learn and to be included as a valued member of the school community.

What is in this handbook?

This handbook will help you understand how the school system works, your role, the role of educators, and your rights and responsibilities within the education system. It will also help you learn to advocate effectively to support your child's education.

Section A: Inclusive Schooling

What is Inclusive Schooling?

Inclusive schooling* in the Northwest Territories (NWT) means that every student is entitled to have access to the education program in a **regular instructional setting*** in their home community.

In a school which is truly inclusive every child feels accepted, valued and safe, and student strengths and challenges are central to all decisions. Core values and beliefs include:

- All students can learn.
- Students learn in different ways, at different rates and in different places.
- Students come from diverse backgrounds and want their differences to be respected.
- Students have the right to an appropriate education program and required supports.
- Parental involvement is essential.

Ministerial Directive on Inclusive Schooling, GNWT ECE, March 2006

What inclusive schooling is not

“Inclusion is not children with disabilities spending the majority of the school day in a special ed room, and being “included” in regular classes for art, PE, and music. This is visitation.

Inclusion is not children with disabilities attending regular education classes, but being repeatedly pulled out for special services through the day. This is part-time mainstreaming.

Inclusion is not children with disabilities being in regular classes, but sitting at the back of the room with full-time aides. This is physical integration.

Inclusion is not typical children (peer role models) visiting children with disabilities in special ed classrooms. This is reverse mainstreaming.

Kathie Snow, Disability is Natural

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

Inclusive education involves much more than being in the same classroom as other students. True inclusion only happens when a whole school believes in diversity and creates a place where everyone belongs. Inclusion means being a part of the school community, both in and out of class. It means having friends and feeling welcome.

Inclusive schooling is important because:

When students with disabilities are educated with their peers:

- all children are better prepared for life in the community and are part of their community.
- all children have more opportunities to learn and be involved with many activities and people. Children with disabilities learn from other children.
- the focus is on the development of children's strengths and gifts. Higher expectations usually lead to more success.
- they are able to work on individual goals while being with other students their own age.
- parents are involved in the education of their children and in the activities of their local schools. Parents and the school work together.
- all children have opportunities to develop friendships. Friends provide role models and opportunities for growth. Friendships are essential to a successful and fulfilling life in the community.
- all children learn how to support each other. They have the opportunity to learn about and accept individual differences.
- it has a positive effect on our communities. As children learn to accept one another, our communities will be accepting and know that everyone of us is valuable.

Section B: Roles

The school and me – who does what?

Parent's role

Parents play a major role in decisions by working with teachers and principals to set realistic goals for their child.

As parents, you need to:

- participate fully as a member of the team
- help school staff understand how your child communicates and what your child needs
- share information and activities with school staff
- involve your child in activities outside of school that can help in their overall development
- let school staff know when things are going well and when they are not
- be involved in decisions made about your child

Classroom Teacher's role

Classroom teachers have daily responsibility for managing the classroom. Teachers set the tone for inclusion and help create an environment where everyone belongs.

The teacher needs to:

- understand and work with your child's strengths and interests
- understand and work with your child's challenges and opportunities
- help other children in the classroom understand your child
- adapt their teaching style, activities and NWT curricula to meet your child's needs
- develop different ways to evaluate your child's progress

Program Support Teacher's Role

Most of the time, **program support teachers*** coordinate the team and the development of **Individual Education Plans (IEP)***. Program support teachers are very knowledgeable about NWT curriculum and **education programs***.

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

The program support teacher can:

- help classroom teachers with **educational programming*** for your child
- conduct **assessments*** of your child's skills, interests and abilities
- provide help with teaching techniques
- provide information and resources to teachers, parents and students
- help find ways to meet your child's needs in the classroom

Support Assistant's Role

A **support assistant*** is sometimes called a program support assistant, a student support assistant, a special needs assistant, aide, classroom assistant or education assistant. A support assistant helps in the classroom and works with all the students some of the time. A support assistant works under the direct supervision of the classroom teacher.

A support assistant can:

- participate as a member of the IEP team
- provide information on what's working now and what's worked in the past
- help your child with learning activities
- help modify materials and teaching strategies to meet your child's needs
- observe and record your child's day-to-day progress
- communicate regularly with the teacher

Principal's role

The principal is the key person in making sure that children are included. They are responsible for making sure that their school provides an education and required supports for all students.

The principal needs to:

- make sure that your child is following the best educational program for your child
- make sure that information, resources, assessments and **support services*** are in place and being used
- provide leadership for school staff, parents and students
- make sure teachers have the information and support they need to effectively teach your child

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

- make sure that school staff and students welcome all students, no matter what their abilities are

The Team

Together, the parent, classroom teacher, program support teacher, support assistant, principal, and perhaps others, such as friends or health professionals, make up the team and work together to ensure your child's success.

The team can:

- take part in planning meetings
- set goals
- review your child's progress
- make sure that the supports your child needs for each stage of their time in school are there
- plan for transitions between school years and between school and later life



Section C: Planning

Planning for my child's education

As a **parent***, you need to begin thinking about your child's education before they begin school. If your child has a disability, early planning is even more important. Here are some things to think about when your child actually starts school:

Planning makes connections

- it helps connect hopes and dreams to daily actions
- it connects the family with the school team in working together to set and meet goals
- it makes possible an inclusive school and community life for your child, one step at a time

Planning is person-centered*

- it focuses on your child and your family
- it responds to all aspects of life – relationships, recreation and educational
- it includes both long and short-term goals for your child
- it may use planning tools such as **MAPS*** and **PATH*** (Appendix F)

Planning is ongoing

- as your child's needs change, plans need to change
- as goals are met, new goals are set
- over time, the way you plan may change
- **transition planning*** is key (see page 14)

Planning is part of the educational process

- it means choosing the **education program*** that meets your child's needs (see page 10)
- it may include developing an **Individual Education Plan*** (see page 11)
- it identifies **support services*** needed (see page 15)

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

Education Programs

There are three main kinds of education programs offered in the NWT and all students will follow one of them. A range of support services can be included in any of the three programs.

As a parent of a child with a disability, you are part of the team that decides which education program is best for your child and what support services are needed to help your child learn.

Regular Education Program

A **Regular Education Program*** is based on the **learning outcomes*** described in the NWT curricula. Learning outcomes for each grade are what each student learns while in a grade. Each grade level has its own learning outcomes.

Modified Education Program

A **Modified Education Program*** is based on the learning outcomes described in the NWT curricula, but allows the student to work at a higher or lower grade level than their assigned grade. Learning outcomes do not change; the level and rate of learning changes.

When a student is on a Modified Education Program, a **Student Support Plan*** is developed. The plan identifies learning areas that are above or below their grade level and any **accommodations*** needed.

Individual Education Program

Individual Education Programs are designed specifically for individual students to meet their specific needs. Students that follow an Individual Education Program have a written Individual Education Plan (IEP). An Individual Education Plan may or may not include skills and knowledge from NWT curricula. Students with developmental disabilities often follow an Individual Education Program.

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

The IEP is a document that states, among other things, the main things your child will learn in a school year. These are called **annual student outcomes**^{*}, and are based on your child's individual strengths and challenges. An IEP is developed for individual students using a template and an instruction handbook. In the NWT, all IEPs are completed using the same template as a base (Appendix D). The IEP is a written commitment by the school team, and it is a working document. All IEP's are written for a period of one school year.

An IEP should include:

- what your child already knows and can do
- what and how your child should learn next
- where your child will learn
- who will provide instruction to your child
- how long it may take
- what your child will do to demonstrate what they've learned
- what support services or resources your child needs for active participation at school

A good IEP will:

- be developed together by a team of people, including you and your child
- clearly state your child's annual student outcomes - they should be "SMART" - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-related (Appendix C)
- describe any changes or supports to help implement the plan
- include a timeline for regular reviews
- be working or "living" documents, which mean it is changed as your child's strengths and needs change

What part do my child and I play in an IEP?

You and your child are important members of the team that develops and monitors your child's IEP. It's important to include your child as much as possible in planning. Ideally, your child should participate in IEP team meetings. Planning works best when both parents and students are active and valued participants in the process.

Both of you can take part in the process by:

- sharing information about your child's past experience, goals, interests, successes and difficulties
- keeping in touch with the teacher

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

- being an active member of the IEP team making decisions
- asking about support services and resources available
- working together at home to meet the annual student outcomes set out in the IEP

Before an IEP team meeting

- talk with your child – what you talk about will depend on your child’s age and abilities
- decide who should be at the IEP team meeting
- write down the thoughts and questions you want to talk about in the meeting
- tell the teacher what you would like to add to the agenda
- tell the teacher how you would like your child to be a part of the meeting
- think about your goals and hopes
- think about any concerns you want the IEP to address

During an IEP team meeting

- provide information about your child and how he or she learns and behaves outside of school
- share any home conditions that may affect your child’s performance or behavior at school
- share any medical updates about your child
- ask questions if anything is unclear
- share your observations on where you have seen changes in your child
- get a copy of the IEP to refer to at home
- find out how you can help work on some of the IEP annual student outcomes at home

After an IEP team meeting

- keep in touch with the teacher
- share with the teacher anything going on at home that may bring about a change in your child’s school work or behaviour
- ask questions about your child’s progress
- work with your child at home to support the IEP

Assessments

Information gathered through **assessments*** help people understand you child's skills and identifies challenges. This helps with planning. It's important to identify a student's learning needs as early as possible. Many students will have an identified need before they enter school. In these cases, it's important for you to share any information you have with the school when you register your child. In some cases, a student's special needs are identified after they start school.

There are informal and formal kinds of assessments.

- Informal assessments include what can be observed, file reviews, and interviews. These kinds of assessments are completed by school staff.
- Formal assessments include standardized assessment tools and are completed by program support teachers, physicians, psychologists and other health professionals.

Both informal and formal assessments are important in identifying needs and planning your child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). School staff should always consult and inform you about formal assessments that they believe are needed for your child, and they should always ask for your consent before they are conducted.

Questions to ask about assessments

- What do you hope to find out from this assessment?
- Why is this assessment being done?
- Will I get a copy of the assessment?
- Who will see this assessment?
- Will I be asked to give approval for its distribution?
- Can I speak to the assessor so that I can understand the results?

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

Transitions

Transitions between grades, schools, and between school and later life, benefit from good planning. To create the best possible future options, begin transition planning early.

Transitions you need to plan for:

1. from home to pre-school
2. from pre-school to elementary school
3. from elementary school to middle school
4. from middle school to high school (secondary school)
5. from high school to post-secondary school, the work force, or other community activities

For some children, the transition from school year to summer may be difficult. For others the transition from one grade to the next may be challenging. This may be due partly to the uncertainty of new settings, or to changes in support services that happen with transitions. Planning for important transition periods may help to ease the bumps in the road.

For example, here are some things to ask about before your child moves to high school:

- course options, course requirements and the **credit system***
- career and program plan*** process
- new and different routines
- support services available
- the number of different classrooms and teachers
- use of lockers and lunchroom
- student clubs and activities
- noon-hour and after school support
- opportunities to visit the new school

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

Support Services

It is important to understand what supports or support services are. These two terms mean the same thing and they are an extra service or piece of equipment for your child to help them overcome challenges to their learning.

These supports are for specific students and are beyond things that are provided to all students as part of the overall school program. Supports can include a wide range of things, such as the following:

- accommodations such as extra time, special seating, or frequent breaks
- assistance such as small group instruction or help with homework
- assessments to better understand an area of difficulty, or how a child learns best
- rehabilitation and medical services such as speech therapy or occupational therapy
- specialized equipment, software, books and other learning materials

All students need support in order to overcome barriers to their learning, but the supports needed can vary widely, from students who need a few supports, once in a while, to students who need many supports most or all of the time. Examples of students with very different needs are the student who sees the counsellor twice because her family pet passed away, to the student who uses a wheel chair, needs assistance with personal care, takes medication during school hours, uses voice-recognition software in order to write, and more.

In general the more complex a student's needs, the more people will be involved in deciding the supports that are needed. Students with developmental disabilities will often have an IEP team made up of people who know the student well and / or have important information to share. It is this team of people, which always includes parents, who should make decisions and / or recommendations for specific supports.

What support services will my child receive?

Decisions about what supports your child will receive should always:

- be based on what your child needs to be able to do, that he or she cannot do now, with as much independence as possible
- be made together by you, the school, and others as necessary
- be **reasonable*** in a given situation

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

Parents of students with developmental disabilities may find that this sometimes does not happen - decisions are not **collaborative**^{*}, or the focus is on problems and limitations instead of on what your child needs to be able to do.

Here are a few things you can do to prevent this from happening:

- make it clear at IEP, or other meetings, that you want the focus to be on what your child needs to be able to do - not what he or she can't do, or a diagnosis your child has been labeled with
- make it clear that you want decisions to be made by the group
- avoid arriving at meetings determined to get a specific support for your child - be open to possibilities and trust that a group decision is probably better than a decision made by one person
- remember that each piece of information from any person involved, is just that, a piece – it is not the whole picture
- understand that a recommendation from a doctor or medical team is exactly that, a recommendation – it is not a prescription that must be filled

Helpful examples

- 1) A specialist's report for a student with serious fine motor problems says, "This student requires a computer for writing." The IEP team decides to purchase a dedicated word processor because it costs much less than a computer, yet it will help with the student's fine motor problems just as well as a computer.
- 2) A student with autism moves from a BC city to a small NWT community. Information about the student's needs and previous supports includes a recommendation from her doctor that she should continue with twice weekly swimming sessions. Since the small NWT community does not have a pool, providing this support is not possible, or reasonable. The IEP team tries to identify another activity that meets the same need as the swimming did.
- 3) A parent has a report from a doctor that says her son needs a full-time aide. The IEP team keeps its focus on what the child needs to be able to do that he cannot do now and establishes three priorities – for example: navigating within the school without wandering the halls / becoming distracted, sharing and taking turns on the playground and in gym, and identifying different coins and bills. Once those needs are agreed on, the team looks at the supports that are needed and reasonable for this student so that he can work towards the priorities with as much independence as possible. The provision of a support assistant is not excluded but it's not automatic either.

* For **Bolded** words, see Glossary

A note about support assistants

If the reason for providing any particular support is to help your child do something that he or she cannot do now, it is important for the IEP team to plan to fade or reduce supports whenever possible. This is particularly true if a support assistant is one of the supports that is decided on. Parents sometimes see that having a support assistant is ideal, but students can become too dependent on a support assistant, which in the long-run is not helping their child. Support assistants are valuable, but should only provide help when necessary. There should be a plan to gradually decrease support assistant time and / or a plan to replace the support assistant with other supports.



Section D: Advocacy

How can I be an advocate for my child?

What is advocacy?

Advocacy means speaking out on behalf of your child so you have a voice in decisions that affect them.

Why advocate?

People who have been labeled with a developmental disability interact with many systems and almost always need support. This is where you come in. The only way others will know if you agree or disagree with a decision, you feel your rights have been violated, or that you have important information to share, is if you speak out on behalf of yourself and your child. If people who have the authority to make decisions that affect you, don't know that you have concerns, it makes sense that they will assume everything is alright.

It is also important to know that everyone should be able to question the rules they are required to live by. Just because something is law or policy doesn't mean that it is fair or just, or that it shouldn't be changed. If you speak up for yourself and your child, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you tried to take care of yourself, even if you don't achieve your goal in the end. If you are advocating, you know that you have tried to improve the circumstances. Speaking out helps people keep their self-respect and dignity.

People who speak out often find that they are not alone. By not being silent, you may lead the way to changes that affect a lot of other people.

What's my role as an advocate?

Being an advocate requires skills that can help you access the support services your child needs. As a parent, you will share information and work with the school to get your child's needs met. Advocacy will require you to speak out on issues that concern you and take an active role in your child's life and education. Remember that advocacy is a fine balancing act that can be an ongoing struggle to make sure everyone feels like they've "won" in difficult situations.

Seven steps to being a good advocate

Here are seven key things that can help you be an effective advocate for you child.

1. Be organized
2. Know how to write effective letters and e-mails
3. Know the facts
4. Identify the problem
5. Identify the key decision makers
6. Use respectful and assertive communication
7. Get support when you need it and know your limits

1. Be organized

- gather the information you need and store it in a file
- keep copies of all correspondence, including e-mails and letters you send and e-mails, letters and reports that you receive
- keep a log of phone calls about your child
- keeping these records will help you be prepared if a concern or problem comes up

2. Know how to write effective letters and e-mails

- think of advocacy letters as business letters that need to be professional
- write a draft or two before sending (this is especially true with e-mails) and wait at least 24 hours before sending something written if you were angry or upset when you wrote it
- ask for a trusted friend or supporter to read over your letter and suggest changes – you want to be assertive without being confrontational
- be clear about why you are writing a letter – explain the problem and if possible suggest a possible solution
- when you can, explain what is working, as well as what needs changes
- keep letters brief, to the point, clear and accurate
- request a written response from the person you're sending the letter or e-mail to – include a time or date you would like to receive a reply by

3. Know the facts

- know about your rights and your child's rights – the NWT Education Act is where you will learn what these rights are (www.justice.gov.nt.ca/PDF/ACTS/Education.pdf)
- find out about funding policies and policies about student placements and Individual Education Plans – ask your school, and if not satisfied, the district or divisional office

4. Identify the problem

- in order to effectively share what you are thinking, you need to identify the key issue or problem
- know that sometimes problems are because of policies or funding and sometimes problems are because of people and attitudes
- a problem because of attitude may be because people haven't had the opportunity to learn about the benefits of inclusive schooling
- or it may be because they haven't had the chance to learn about your child
- it's important to build good working relationships with people even under these circumstances – this is a good time to share what you know
- enlist staff at the school to help you problem solve or find a solution
- when looking for a solution, know what you want and what you're willing to accept

5. Identify key decision makers

- know who is making decisions
- be informed about roles and responsibilities (see page 6)
- know the protocol or rules and the how the system works – this will help you know who to talk to first or next
- follow the steps in the system one at a time
- know that sometimes you need to direct your requests to different people

6. Use respectful and assertive communication

- remember that your communication style can affect your chances of succeeding
- be assertive and clear but try not to be too forceful
- use a cooperative approach
- remember to tell people when things are working, not just when they're not working
- be patient and supportive
- offer opportunities for people to get to know you and your child – have your child attend meetings if you think it's appropriate
- share your hopes, dreams and stories

7. Get support when you need it and know your limits

- being a good advocate also means knowing when you need help
- connect with other parents, friends family or supportive organizations to help you throughout your journey
- use a cooperative approach
- remember that you are not alone and that there are many other parents having similar experiences
- being an effective advocate sometimes means taking a break
- sometimes you have to pick your battles and take on the pieces that you have the time and energy for
- as a parent, you are in this for the long haul, so you need to balance your load and keep yourself healthy

What do I do if I don't agree with a decision?

There are some steps you can take if you don't agree with a decision that's been made about your child's education. It is a formal step-by-step process. The following is a brief overview of the steps, but it is a very complicated process and there are many details involved that are not listed here. You may want help from an expert if you take this path. The whole process can be found in the NWT Education Act and Regulations which can be found at www.justice.gov.nt.ca/PDF/ACTS/education.pdf

	For All Schools	For schools under a Divisional Education Council (DEC) (all schools except YK#1, YCS and CFFD)
1	If you don't agree with a decision by the school, write the principal and explain the problem.	
2	The principal should work on solving the problem. If the principal is unsuccessful, he or she should explain this to you in writing.	
3	If you and the principal can't come to an agreement, write a letter to the District Educational Authority (DEA) about the problem.	If you don't agree with a decision by the DEC, write them a letter outlining the problem.
4	The DEA will try to resolve the problem. If unsuccessful, the DEA should notify you in writing, and let you know that you can appeal their decision.	The DEC will try to resolve the problem. If unsuccessful, the DEC should notify you in writing, and let you know that you can appeal their decision.
5	The DEA will follow the Education Act and Education Appeal Regulations. This will involve creating an Appeal Committee. This is a committee of people that aren't involved in the decision being appealed.	The DEC will follow the Education Act and Education Appeal Regulations. This will involve creating an Appeal Committee. This is a committee of people that aren't involved in the decision being appealed.
6	The decision of the DEA Appeal Committee is final.	The decision of the DEC Appeal Committee is final.
7	There are no other options available at this point, unless your child was expelled from school. In this case, you can request the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment to review the decision.	There are no other options available at this point, unless your child was expelled from school. In this case, you can request the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment to review the decision.

Finding solutions outside the school system

If you are unable to fix the problem by following the steps of appeal through the education system, there are other options available to you. At these levels, it is a good idea to get help from a trained advocate or lawyer. Below are some strategies you could try:

File a human rights complaint

If a decision is made that you believe discriminates against your child because of a disability (or any other reason), you can file a complaint with the NWT Human Rights Commission. Their job is to help people understand human rights, look after and settle complaints and above all, they do not take sides.

Contact a politician

It may help to write a letter explaining your problem and sending it to your Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) or the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. Remember to keep copies of your letters and make copies for anyone you think you should have one. Politicians are likely to contact the DEA or DEC about your complaint.

Take legal action

In some cases, you may be able to take action through the courts to resolve your issue. You need to seek legal advice to find out if this is possible in your particular case, and if so, which legal process you should take.

Tell your story to the media

Some people turn to the media to bring attention to the issues they face, in the hope that the attention will help bring about a resolution. When all other options have been tried, media attention can put added pressure on politicians and decision-makers to resolve an issue.

There are risks involved with seeking media attention. Be prepared for your child's disability to become a topic of public discussion. Once your story is in the media, you won't have control over how it is reported. Consider media coverage only as a last resort when all other attempts have failed, and seek the help of a trained, experienced advocate before going to the media.

When you're angry and frustrated with a system that seems unjust or uncaring, it may be tempting to go to the media early in the process. Keep in mind that there are usually greater benefits to working hard to solve issues close to home.