

A Common Understanding of Inclusive Education

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Executive Directors and Chairs Network



Acknowledgements:

This document, *A Common Understanding of Inclusive Education*, was prepared by and represents a collaborative and consensus effort of the Executive Directors and Chairs Network. This Network, comprising of representatives from the provincial community organizations, working with and on behalf of persons with disabilities and their families in this province, meets on a regular basis to critically discuss issues of common interest in order to provide a more powerful and united voice within the disability community. Collectively, the organizations within the Executive Directors and Chairs Network in one way or another represent the vast majority of the approximately 75,000 citizens within this province who report as having a disability.

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Foreword:

Our public education system plays a critical role in shaping who we are as individuals and in imparting values and principles that influence our society. Beyond the family unit it represents the most powerful means by which future generations are affected. If persons with disabilities are to live inclusive lives within community, our public education system must help prepare them. If we are to become a society that is accepting of diversity then our public education system must model and embrace diversity within our schools. The separate or parallel education of children, based on disability or other labels, does not result in quality education nor does it prepare students, with and without disability, for life within our increasingly diverse and complex communities. An inclusive education should be the foundation of and set an expectation for an inclusive life.

Within this province, significant efforts have been expended toward the creation of an educational system that meets the needs of all students. The issue of inclusion – its philosophy, benefits and delivery – has been much debated over the past 25 years, both within the education system and the disability community. All too often this debate has given an illusion of a lack of support for inclusive education, and unfortunately has stalled the achievement of a truly inclusive model within our schools.

The primary intent of the document is to dispel this myth, and to send a strong and unequivocal message that there is indeed consensus within the disability community as to the concept of inclusion. A message that we stand united, with and on behalf of the families we represent, in asking for an education for our sons and daughters that is inclusive by design and intent. We are united in our expectation of an education system that places equal value on all children, and one that provides the necessary supports and resources to both teachers and students so as to achieve inclusion.

This document provides a consensus view of the disability community as to the merits of inclusive education, our vision and definition of inclusive education, and the principles and elements that must be present in order that the rhetoric of inclusion can actually be realized on a daily basis within classrooms throughout this province. Inclusion is no longer a matter for debate, no longer can it be a promise unfulfilled, and no longer can it be the exception rather than the rule. This paper provides the model of inclusion that our community expects, a model that has received endorsement within the disability community, and a model of inclusion to which we will hold government and the education system accountable.

A Common Understanding of Inclusive Education

All children have a right to a public (K – 12) education. All children have a right to an inclusive public education. Inclusive education does not reside solely within the domain of disabilities. Today's schools are becoming increasingly diverse and the educational system must address the diversity of all students, *not just those students with a disability*. Diversity within the school system is now the norm, not the exception. Educational policy and practice must acknowledge and reflect this reality. Inclusive education is not an artifact of placement, but rather the result of creating a common learning environment where all students feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and participation. Inclusive education, with required supports in place, is quality education.

There is an obligation to provide an inclusive educational system at all levels. This obligation is best portrayed and summarized within the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24). The development and implementation of an inclusive education system must provide for the equality of opportunity and outcomes as described within the CRPD and Article 24.

An inclusive education ensures that all students have:

- Opportunity to be included, in the common learning environment in neighborhood schools with their peers, in ways that fully acknowledge and accommodate their diverse learning needs. Participation in the common learning environment, however, does not in any way diminish access to required and beneficial instruction outside that common environment;
- Opportunity to participate in and contribute to all school (both in class and extra-curricular) activities, recognizing that individual students will require differing types and levels of support to do so;
- Opportunity to form, sustain and participate in socially valuing relationships with their peers, both in and outside the school environment.

An inclusive education establishes lifelong patterns of inclusion. When children and youth with disabilities grow and learn alongside their peers they have better outcomes as adults in that they are more likely to continue in education, get a job, and be included and valued in their communities. Children learn what they experience and in an inclusive education setting children without disabilities learn about diversity, about respect and about valuing all people, regardless of ability. An inclusive education shapes values, attitudes and lives.

I. Vision:

A progressive model of inclusive education that is equally accessible and universal enables all children to reach their full learning potential, and in which decisions are based on the individual needs and solely for the benefit of the student, which in turn benefits society.

II. Definition:

Inclusive education is welcoming and accepting of all learners, in all of their diversity and exceptionalities, in common learning environments, in neighborhood school with their age peers. Inclusive education means identifying the student's learning style, disability related accommodation and adapting classroom and teaching strategies to ensure high quality outcomes for all students. Inclusive education fosters the participation and fullest possible development of the potential of all learners, in socially valuing relationships with diverse peers and adults. Inclusive education results from shared values and beliefs of both school and community, within the context of coherent and connected philosophy, policy and practice, with committed leadership and a shared sense of direction. All students feel a sense of belonging, are respected, confident and safe, and have all their physical, academic and social needs met. Inclusive education means that teachers have the instructional and other supports necessary to provide an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students. Inclusive education means that every child has the opportunity to learn and contribute to all aspects of school life. Inclusive education reflects a willingness to be innovative, and to seek and value input from parents/caregivers and students. Inclusive education is a right – not an exception. Inclusive education is the foundation for ensuring an inclusive society.

III. Principles:

Universality - All students regardless of their diversity (be it ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, disability) are entitled to the supports and services necessary to ensure a quality education that is equitable to that provided to their peers. All students have a right to an educational experience that is provided within an inclusive common learning environment shared with their peers, recognizing however that in some instances accommodations must be made to ensure appropriate individualized instruction.

Individualization – Instructional methods and associated teaching strategies, including modifications to curriculum, are based on the identified strengths and needs, learning styles and skills of the student. Supports and services necessary

to ensure maximum participation in and benefit from the educational curriculum and the school environment are provided based on these individual needs.

Duty To Accommodate – The educational needs and capabilities of an individual student are constantly changing and as such the learning conditions must also change, evolve and demonstrate needed flexibility in response to student needs. The needs of the student take priority over the needs of the system. Student needs can be met by individual accommodation (unique to the student) and/or accommodation that has applicability and benefit to all students.

IV. Elements of an inclusive education model:

To ensure equality of opportunity and to facilitate the attainment of inclusive educational outcomes, an inclusive education model must also include:

Value and Respect – All students are respected as individuals and are afforded the right to a positive learning environment, reflective of their individual needs and strengths. All students need a wide range of educational supports and services.

Student Centered Planning - Decisions are always made for the benefit of the individual student based on a full understanding of both needs and strengths. Individual learning styles are acknowledged and fully and appropriately accommodated. The common learning environment, including curriculum and teaching strategy, is designed and/or adapted to ensure that each student learns to his or her full potential. Teachers have appropriate and adequate planning time in order to develop and implement student centered instruction.

Trained Educators – All school personnel must value, respect and model inclusion through both attitudes and action. All educators must have necessary and appropriate pre-service (academic and professional) training, supplemented as needed, by appropriate and ongoing professional development. Teachers must possess the required training and have appropriate supports to facilitate the learning styles of all students. Professional development must be in accord with evidence-based models of best practice.

Partnerships – Collaborative partnerships with parents/caregivers, government departments, community groups and other support agencies are created and sustained. The expertise of these groups is recognized and used to the fullest extent possible. Input from parents/caregivers and students is both encouraged

and sought on an ongoing basis so as to influence and inform all educational decisions.

Access to Supports – All students are provided with a full range of supports, programs, services and resources that meet their individual needs as determined by a student centered plan, enable attainment of their individual educational goals, and contribute to their cognitive, social, emotional, psychological and cultural development. Supports also include various assistive and adaptive technologies, which are attached to the individual student and are available for use across both home and school environments. Supports are provided as required, with equal access regardless of geographic location.

Curriculum – The common learning environment is structured such that it maximizes and facilitates the attainment of educational outcomes for all students. Curriculum is individualized through modification, if necessary, and appropriate teaching strategies, including the use of differential instruction and alternative evaluation.

Assessment - Relevant and timely assessments and reassessments are used to help identify individual student strengths, needs, and learning styles and this information is used to inform and influence teaching strategies. Assessments used are appropriate to the student's age, developmental status, cultural and linguistic background and are administered on an as required and ongoing basis.

Transition Planning – Particular and appropriate attention must be given to points of transition in the educational life of the student, including school entry, transition from primary to elementary, elementary to high school, and school leaving (to enter employment or post-secondary training). Appropriate transition planning is multidisciplinary, begins well in advance of the actual transition, involves educators, interdepartmental representation, parents/caregivers, students and community organizations (as necessary), and includes the identification (and provision) of supports necessary to ensure a successful and inclusive transition. A comprehensive educational system also includes an integrated approach to early intervention, pre-school services and provision of needed enrichment / early intervention programs.

Full Participation – An inclusive education acknowledges that not all learning occurs within the classroom. All students have access (with needed support) to the full range of school activities, after hours and extracurricular activities. All

students have the opportunity and means to be fully included in, and contribute to, the life of the school.

V. Duty to accommodate:

All students have a right to an education. The public school system has a legal obligation to accommodate students with a disability such that they are given the opportunity to meet their individual potential. A lack of accommodation can constitute discrimination.

The goal of accommodation is to ensure the fullest possible participation, to the same extent as other students, in all aspects of the educational and social life of the school. Accommodation must take into account the principles of dignity, individualization and inclusion. Accommodation means placing priority on the individual needs of the student, and changing learning conditions as necessary to meet those individual needs rather than requiring students to fit the needs of the system. Accommodation is not based on labels or generalizations - the emphasis is on the individual student, not on the 'category' of disability.

All students have the right to expect:

- Participation in a learning environment that is designed for all students, typical for the student's age and grade level, and shared with their peers;
- Necessary accommodations that are appropriate and provided as required, based on individual strengths and needs, where it has been established by bona fide evidence that the status quo is not to their fullest benefit;
- Assessment, instruction, modification and adaptation, resources, supports, assistive and adaptive technology that are designed and based on their individual learning style, strengths and abilities, and needs;
- Full access to and participation in all social and extracurricular activities of school life;
- Input into the development and delivery of their educational program, either directly or via their parents/caregivers;

A foundational assumption of inclusive education is that students receive instruction, to the fullest extent possible and appropriate, in the common learning environment. Every effort must be made to ensure that students with a disability achieve their educational goals while being included in the regular classroom.

- In some circumstances, it may be to the benefit of the student with a disability to receive one-on-one or small group instruction for all or part of the day.
- Before such is considered, it must be clearly demonstrated that appropriate learning outcomes cannot be reasonably achieved within a more inclusive setting.
- These learning situations are not created as a response to disability, label or category but rather are based on individual assessment, and designed to assist the student better achieve his or her learning objectives.
- The goal is to provide all reasonable accommodations and supports to ensure that the student can return to the classroom as quickly and as appropriately as possible.
- Timelines are in place for reassessing the student to determine when he or she may return to the classroom (either on a part or full time basis). Assessments are as needed and decisions made on an individual basis.

VI. Accountability:

All components and levels of the public education system must be held accountable for the development and implementation of inclusive educational practices. An appropriate accountability framework would include:

- Indicators of, and targets for, inclusive practices at a provincial level, implemented in a consistent manner across all school districts and schools, and monitored and evaluated on a regular basis.
- Evaluation that provides for documentation of evidence based models of best practices and, where indicated, areas for improvement noted and necessary strategies put into place.
- Full compliance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Newfoundland and Labrador Human Rights Act (2010), and to the fullest extent possible (through progressive realization, if necessary) the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- Provision for mediation, advocacy and/or dispute resolution(s) where conflicts arise regarding situations in which the learning outcomes or safety of students may be jeopardized or at risk. The intent of such intervention would be to identify solutions that are to the benefit of the student.

Respectfully submitted by;

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