

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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Alberta's Action on Inclusion *Transforming diversity into possibility*

Editor's note: This article was submitted by Alberta Education at the invitation of the Association.

The right to belong

Education must be viewed as a facilitator in everyone's human development and functionality, regardless of barriers of any kind, physical or otherwise. Therefore, disability of any kind (physical, social and/or emotional) cannot be a disqualifier. ... [T]he move towards inclusion is not simply a technical or organisational change, but also a movement with a clear philosophy. (Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All. UNESCO 2005)

Each of us has a fundamental need to belong. In fact, belonging is the guiding force in all our business, social and personal interactions. We belong to sports teams, churches, community leagues and service clubs because doing so creates meaning in our lives. Feeling included shapes our identity, bolsters our self-esteem and fuels our personal growth.

As educators, our work is to nurture that sense of belonging to create optimal learning environments where students feel supported and valued. For too long, however, many students designated with "special needs" were often left outside the circle of belonging. Attitudes and practice related to special education often created a glass wall between students with diverse learning needs and their classmates, between them and their right to an education.

Setting the Direction

The findings from the 2007 Alberta Education Severe Disabilities Profile Review that showed that only 56 per cent of the files

related to students with severe disabilities met the ministry's policy requirements resulted in the launch of Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta in 2008. The mandate for Setting the Direction was to create a new framework for special education in Grades 1 through 12. After 18 months and consultation with more than 7,000 Albertans, it became evident to the Setting the Direction steering committee that the mandate was too narrow. What emerged from the consultative process was the recognition that *every* student has unique needs. Some students have profound and ongoing needs; others have short term and/or situation-based needs. The steering committee recognized that a two-stream education system—one that physically and socially isolates a certain population of students—is neither effective nor just.

In 2009, the Setting the Direction steering committee presented the Minister of Education with its framework, which articulated a vision, mission and principle statements to create "one inclusive education system where each student is successful." The steering committee's vision for inclusion does not necessarily mean that every student registered in the Alberta school system will be placed in a regular classroom. Physical placement will be flexible and changeable, always with the student's success in mind. The framework identifies three key strategic priority areas—curriculum, capacity and collaboration—and recommends a vision of an inclusive education that repositions special

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy.

—Martin Luther King, Jr



education within the broader education system.

“The steering committee ventured beyond their mandate, and I’m thankful they did,” explains Education Minister Dave Hancock. “It made my government colleagues and me realize that inclusive education is not just a way of acting, it’s a way of thinking that demonstrates a truly universal acceptance of all students.”

In June 2010, the Government of Alberta provided its formal response to the Setting the Direction framework in which it accepted all 12 of the proposed strategic directions and committed to developing implementation and transition plans in consultation with partners and stakeholders. Earlier this fall the Setting the Direction framework was consolidated with government’s Inspiring Action on Education initiative, and Setting the Direction has been renamed Action on Inclusion to signal the start of implementation.

Action on Inclusion

An inclusive education system is a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance of, and belonging for, all students. Inclusive education in Alberta means a value-based approach to accepting responsibility for all students. It also means that all students will have equitable opportunity to be included in the typical learning environment or program of choice where such placement is appropriate and is undertaken in full consultation with a child’s parents/guardians, teachers, school officials, and relevant community service providers. (Definition of inclusion from the Setting the Direction Framework)

Action on Inclusion is nothing short of a complete cultural transformation. It will move Alberta’s education system away from the special education

programming paradigm and replace it with an emphasis on achieving outcomes for all students. It shifts the education system’s focus onto what students with diverse learning needs *can* do and away from the limitations their condition may place on them.

“We have to abandon the notion that there are mainstream students and ‘special needs’ students,” says Minister Hancock. “Action on Inclusion reminds us that these kinds of demarcations can, in fact, work in opposition to student success by marginalizing those with diverse learning needs.”

Transformative Action

Transformation cannot happen without transformative action. Creating an inclusive education system requires changes to our thinking and our action with respect to both educational practice and government policy.

Historically, supporting students with diverse learning needs has been the responsibility of special education teachers and specialists. Moving to an inclusive education system puts that responsibility on the education system as a whole. This is a significantly different way of doing things. Systemwide transformation is a process, and the how of creating an inclusive school environment is still evolving. What’s clear, though, is that principals, as educational leaders, have a unique role in fostering and supporting a collaborative, inclusive culture that meets the needs of every student. Specifically, principals can

- foster collaborative school communities where teams have a shared responsibility to support the success of all students;
- encourage and support effective inclusion practices;
- foster a strengths-based approach to meeting the needs of students by

placing emphasis on what student *can* do, rather than the limitations of their diagnosed condition;

- shift the focus from changing the student to changing the student’s environment so that barriers are reduced and students have the supports they need to be successful;
- engage teachers, students, parents and service providers in a collaborative approach to identifying and providing effective educational supports;
- support staff by ensuring that they have time and resources to collaborate;
- serve as role models for inclusive practice;
- ensure that school activities and community reflect inclusivity in an authentic way; and
- ensure that all students are equally valued and contributing members of the school community.

Implementation Update

As it moves toward full implementation of Action on Inclusion, the Government of Alberta is taking a multipronged approach to the transition to an inclusive education system. The key to becoming a truly inclusive education system lies in collaborative practices that support success for all—students, teachers and school communities. Alberta Education plans to work with education partners to ensure that schools have a clear understanding of how to transform into inclusive school communities. In addition, the Government of Alberta will support school authorities in ensuring that teachers have the skills and resources they need to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. The Ministry is currently working on a number of short-term priorities to help build teacher capacity. Piloting of the Inclusive Education

Planning process, for example, offers teachers information and strategies on getting to know their students; understanding the implications that physical, cognitive, psychological or social challenges have on learning; and identifying supports needed for learning. The ministries of Education, Health and Wellness and Children and Youth Services are also collaborating to establish a common understanding of outcomes, service delivery, data collection, information sharing and funding, and to develop a legislative and policy framework for inclusion.

This implementation process will include developing a new funding model that supports the needs of all students. The current special education system has relied on the requirement of a diagnosis in order to assign a code that generates funding for support and

services. This system, though devised with the best of intentions, erred by reducing the richness and complexity of a human life to a number. Action on Inclusion is about determining every student's strengths and needs, and then providing the support they need to be successful. Alberta Education is currently working with its partners and stakeholders to develop a new funding framework that will improve the allocation and use of resources to support and enable every student to succeed. However, in 2010/11 school authorities are expected to continue to identify students with special needs so that appropriate programming is provided and the current use of special education codes remains in place.

The Government of Alberta is committed to keeping the lines of communication open with school

authorities and supporting them as Action on Inclusion is implemented. Principals are encouraged to prepare for discussions about the implications of this transition for educational practice and administrative processes in their jurisdictions. The Alberta Education website houses all the background documents for Setting the Direction as well as the most current information about implementation of Action on Inclusion. There is much to be done; it will take careful thought and analysis, and more conversations with all stakeholders, to create a smooth transition to an inclusive education system. There will be bumps! But let's remember that we're all in this together. And, together, we're moving forward to create a more responsive and effective educational approach to serving *all* students in our schools.



Q & A

GORDON THOMAS
Executive Secretary

Q: What do the courts say about teachers' use of photocopied texts and materials in the classroom?

A: This past summer, the Federal Court of Appeal (FCA) issued a decision in *Alberta, Minister of Education et al versus Access Copyright (2010 FCA 198) et al.* The case centred on the Court's review of an earlier Copyright Board's ruling that photocopying copyright-protected texts and works for distribution to

students in the classroom is, in fact, subject to royalties. The FCA declared that such materials do not fall under the "fair dealing" exemptions extended to "research or personal study" outlined in Section 29 of the *Copyright Act*.

In its original decision, the Copyright Board argued that educational institutions should pay royalties to copyright holders for photocopying, scanning or reproducing protected works in elementary, junior high and high school classrooms back to 2005. Several provincial education ministers and various education partners challenged the Board's decision that classroom use of photocopied materials was beyond "fair dealing," and the FCA was asked to judicially review the ruling. In its decision, the FCA upheld the Copyright Board's reasoning and found no error in law with the Board's ruling. The provincial ministers of education are now seeking leave to appeal this case to the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC). The SCC's decision will be of importance to all K-12 teachers. Stay tuned.

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