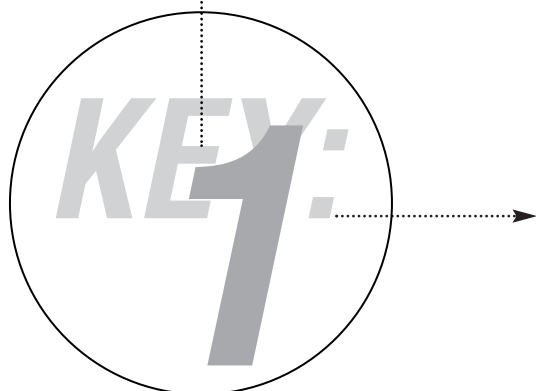


## Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities



# Collaboration

No single individual has all the knowledge and expertise required to understand and meet the complex learning needs of students with learning disabilities. Collaboration is key to successful instruction, particularly for students with special needs. Essentially, collaboration is the process of working together with collaborative problem solving at the heart. Collaborative teaming can take place at many levels. Regular classroom teachers team with others in many ways to support students with learning disabilities. Given that there are constraints on time and resources in schools, it is important to consider the benefits of collaboration, including:

- increased understanding of the student through sharing expertise and diverse perspectives
- increased expertise to address a broader range of student needs
- expanded repertoire of instructional strategies for team members
- expanded ideas on how to meet a student's needs
- increased communication and consistency

- maximized instructional time through teaming and organization of personnel and resources
- shared decision making
- shared responsibility.

A problem-solving approach is the core of effective collaboration, whether the team is large or small, formal or informal. The problem-solving cycle begins with identifying and clarifying the problem. Solutions are generated and evaluated, and a plan of action is made. A timeline for implementation and a method for evaluating the plan are established. It is important to get back together to evaluate the plan. Is it working? If necessary, the problem-solving cycle is revisited. (For more information about problem solving, see Appendix 1, pages 74–75.)

## Facilitating Collaboration

The many benefits of collaboration can be realized by considering the following strategies.

- Consider organizational approaches that involve collaborative teaming and problem solving. Many names are used to describe collaborative teams; e.g., Student Assistance Team, School Resource Group. A Student Support Team Model is one formal example of an approach to collaborative teaming. (See page LD.49 of *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* [Alberta Education, 1996], Book 6 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series.) This approach can be particularly powerful in helping classroom teachers address problems a student is encountering prior to formal assessment or diagnostic procedures. The team may consist of a school administrator, a classroom teacher, a special education teacher, a student's parent and, where appropriate, the student. The members of the team may vary at different points in the program planning process. The team comes together and engages in collaborative problem solving as described above.
- Emphasize pre-referral activities (opportunities for teachers to raise concerns about a student's progress and engage in problem solving) before there is a formal referral. Provide opportunities for every teacher to participate and receive support.

- Involve parents immediately when concerns about a student arise. Welcome parents as important team members. Recognize and respect the information they can provide about their children and their contribution to their children's programs.
- Involve the student. Students can provide important information about their learning and will be more actively engaged in their programs if they are involved in setting goals. Students learn valuable skills for self-advocacy.
- Involve administrators. Their support is essential to success. Leadership is needed to develop schoolwide acceptance of shared responsibility for the success of all students in the school. Supportive structures are necessary to organize a systematic process for collaborative program planning and ensure that there is time for collaboration.
- Designate one school-based person to be responsible for facilitating the process, seeking additional expertise; e.g., psychologist, speech and language pathologist, and for the overall organization and coordination of resources.
- Have flexible membership drawing on all the expertise in the school. Do not limit the collaboration to formal interactions of a designated team. Encourage regular collaborative problem-solving meetings for smaller teams responsible for implementing and monitoring educational plans.
- Respect the time demands on team members. Consider everyone's schedule when setting up meetings and control the time spent in meetings. Clear roles and responsibilities help team members prepare for meetings. To maximize efficiency, designate one person to facilitate the meeting, set goals and organize information. Have a clear process for problem solving and planning.
- Give team building time. To develop positive team connections, teams need time to work together. Organizational strategies that facilitate time for co-teaching, consultation and meetings will support the development of effective teams. The team will require ongoing communication strategies, such as communication books, e-mail, newsletters, etc.
- Recognize and develop expertise for ongoing problem solving and support. Specialized expertise is not always easily accessible and

building capacity is an important aspect of collaboration. Through collaborative teaming to meet the needs of particular students, team members are exposed to new ideas and solutions to problems. Consider expanding the knowledge base of school personnel through a variety of professional development opportunities, such as study groups, newsletters, internal workshops, external workshops and conferences.

- The following contribute to the success of collaborative teaming:
  - willingness to share and exchange expertise and resources
  - acceptance of mutual responsibility and accountability for key decisions, as appropriate
  - small working teams
  - clearly established roles and responsibilities
  - all members contribute, all contributions are valued
  - training and supervision for teaching assistants, volunteers and peer tutors
  - procedures for sharing observations and monitoring progress
  - regular time for planning and communication, especially if instruction is provided outside the regular classroom. (Address transition and generalization, links to classroom instruction, common language and cues for the student.)

## Outcomes

The outcomes below describe potential results from implementing the strategies, activities and practices in this section.

- Teachers have coordinated and easy access to expertise when they have concerns about a student.
- Parents have an early, ongoing and meaningful role in collaborative problem solving to meet their children's needs.

- Students have an ongoing meaningful role in planning, implementing and evaluating their programs.
- There is flexible organization of instruction and coordination of resources to meet individual student needs.

### **Connections** to Other Alberta Learning Resources

See Setting up a Student Support Team and Program Planning Process Model, pages LD.49–LD.57 in *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* (Alberta Education, 1996), Book 6 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series.

