

Building the
Learning Team

Chapter 4

Creating a Network of Support

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This resource is primarily intended for:

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Administrators	✓
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Counsellors	✓
Students	
Parents	
General Public	



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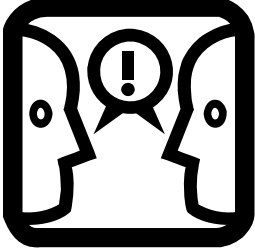
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Chapter 4

Creating a Network of Support



Collaboration is key to successful planning and implementation of the individualized program planning process. Collaborative teaming can take place at many levels. In addition to teachers, parents and the student, a number of other individuals may be involved in developing and implementing an IPP. The school principal must play an administrative role. Teacher assistants, other school personnel, specialists, health-service providers and community members may also be part of the learning team.

Given that there are constraints on time and resources in schools, it is important to consider the benefits of collaboration, including:

- shared expertise and diverse perspectives—drawing on the knowledge of all team members results in increased understanding and information about:
 - the student (e.g., classroom observations, relationships with peers, developmental stages, test results, normative information, speech and language development)
 - ways to address a broad range of student needs
 - instructional strategies available for team members
- shared decision making—involving all team members in decision making creates greater support for the team and the plan
- shared responsibility—ensuring the team members are jointly responsible for implementing the plan they developed increases buy-in, maximizes instructional time through teaming and organization of personnel and resources, and increases communication and consistency in implementing the IPP.

Supporting the Learning Team

The following individuals may be part of the learning team at various stages of developing and implementing a student's IPP.

School principal

Under the *Standards for Special Education, Amended January 2004*, the principal is responsible for special education programming in the school.

The role of the school principal includes:

- ensuring that an IPP is developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated for each student identified as having a special education need
- identifying teachers whose responsibility it is to coordinate, develop, implement, monitor and evaluate student IPPs
- ensuring the school has a process and school-based team to provide consultation, planning and problem solving related to programming for students with special education needs
- ensuring that support personnel, appropriate materials and inservice training are provided as required given the needs of the student.

Classroom teachers

The role of the classroom teacher is to:

- be accountable for, and develop, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the IPP, in collaboration with other team members
- assess students' strengths and areas of need through observation, formal and informal assessment, and explain results to other team members
- develop strategies for incorporating goals and objectives into existing classroom activities and routines
- monitor and regularly report on the student's progress, and adapt or modify activities, routines, instructional strategies or objectives, as necessary
- provide teacher assistants with ongoing direction and monitoring regarding program implementation
- ensure that the IPP includes all essential elements required by Alberta Education
- maintain ongoing communication and collaboration with other members of the learning team
- seek guidance and feedback from the learning team, as needed.

Teacher assistants

Teacher assistants provide supportive and complementary services in the classroom in order to enhance the learning experiences of students, especially those with special education needs.

Generally, teacher assistants are assigned to a program or classroom rather than to an individual student. Assignments may change depending on students' needs, the resources available and other needs in the school or classroom.

Teacher assistants receive all directions and assigned responsibilities from the teacher or principal. Teachers are ultimately responsible for planning, implementing and assessing students' programs. Some roles and responsibilities delegated to teacher assistants could include:

- providing individual support under the direction of the teacher and based on the objectives and goals outlined in the student's IPP
- working with a small group of students to reinforce a concept or skill that the teacher has previously taught to the group
- providing personal care, such as toileting, personal hygiene, dressing or checking the operation of assistive equipment
- assisting with material preparation
- providing information to the teacher about a student's academic performance, behaviour, growth and needs
- supervising students beyond the classroom, such as on the playground or at work-experience sites
- providing behaviour support by reinforcing appropriate behaviour consistent with the teacher's expectations.

Other school staff

There may be a number of other school staff who support both the student with special education needs and/or the classroom teacher. They could include special education coordinators, resource room teachers and counsellors. Depending on the organization of the school, these individuals could be involved in one or more stages of the IPP process and their level of support could range from daily interaction to an infrequent as-needed consultation.

Depending on the goals identified in the IPP, other school staff such as lunchroom supervisors or bus drivers may play a supporting role in ensuring goals are achieved across a range of situations. For example, a student experiencing social difficulties will need consistent support across the school day and across school environments. If a student is working on a goal such as improving self-control, it is essential that all adults working with the student understand and support the strategies, reinforcement systems and reporting process related to this goal.

Parents

The role of parents is to:

- advocate for their child's best interests, and communicate their views regarding programming and goals to other team members
- contribute to the direction and focus of the IPP, in collaboration with other team members
- participate in their child's learning team to ensure that selected goals and objectives are reinforced across the child's environments (e.g., daycare, respite, home)
- provide ongoing feedback about the generalization of skills to the home and community environments
- maintain ongoing communication and collaboration with the classroom teacher and other team members
- seek guidance from the learning team, as needed.

Specialists

Many students with special education needs will require access to a specialist at some point in the IPP process. Depending on the needs of the student, these specialists could include occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, medical doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, behavioural specialists and other health-related professionals. These members of the learning team can help diagnose and provide support for meeting a variety of health and social-emotional needs.

Health-related services

School jurisdictions make provisions for students to have access to the coordinated support services (including health-related services) they require to meet individualized programming goals. Each school jurisdiction, in partnership with other regional service providers, has its own local procedures for the delivery of these services. The school principal will be able to provide information about coordinated health services.

Community members

Any individuals in the community who have substantial contact with the student may have an informal role in supporting the student's programming. Coaches, daycare workers, family support workers and other community members may be able to provide information about the student's behaviour in different contexts, and/or contribute to reaching the student's IPP goals in these contexts.

Some students with special education needs may benefit from the individual attention of a mentor. A mentor is an adult or older student who commits to working regularly with a student for a certain period of time, usually one to three hours per week. Mentors who work with a student during school hours look for ways to support that student's classroom learning. Mentors work under the direction of the teacher. They take a personal interest in the student's academic and social development, introduce him or her to new experiences, and act as role models. Mentors are usually volunteers and are often recruited, trained and supported through community agencies, such as Big Brothers or Big Sisters. Mentors can be informal members of the learning team.

Facilitating Collaboration

A problem-solving approach is often an important component of effective collaboration. 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.

Sample strategies

For more information

Sample strategies for facilitating collaboration

- Emphasize prereferral 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 and the student throughout the process. See Chapter 2: *Encouraging Parent Involvement* and Chapter 3: *Supporting Student Participation* for more information and sample strategies.
- 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.
- 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.

- Allow 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.
- Encourage the following to 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.)

Sample strategies

Sample strategies for facilitating effective IPP meetings¹

- Ensure that the meeting has a clear purpose or goal, and that roles and responsibilities are clear for tasks occurring before, during and after the meeting.
- Schedule meetings at a time and place that is convenient for all participants.
- Arrange for round table seating in a comfortable space that is free of noise and distractions.
- Talk informally with each participant before the meeting to ensure that all individuals will be able to attend the meeting and remain for the entire time (as far as possible and necessary), and that all participants have what they need to be adequately prepared.
- Review evaluation results in advance and arrange for support in explaining the results to other team members, if necessary.
- Provide or post a written agenda.

1. Adapted from Nicholas R. M. Martin, *A Guide to Collaboration for IEP Teams* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2005), pp. 14–16. Adapted by permission of Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

- Ensure that all participants introduce themselves to one another and explain their roles as members of the team.
- Set and agree on a clear process for problem solving and planning, as well as ground rules regarding issues such as interrupting, leaving the meeting and using cell phones.

Appendices

See Appendix 4-A for a sample working agreement for collaboration.

- Schedule available time and respectfully redirect participants who wander off-track.
- Maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect, where all participants share in and contribute to a common purpose.
- Take short breaks as needed.
- Restate the outcome of the meeting at the end for clarity and any necessary correction.
- Keep a written record of questions and issues to be addressed at a later date.
- Maintain an open-door policy for airing and sharing between meetings.
- Remind team members that information discussed in the meetings is confidential. Assure participants that this information will be shared thoughtfully and respectfully, and within the bounds of confidentiality.
- Ensure the meeting ends on a positive note; thank participants for their time and contributions.

Sample strategies

Sample strategies for safeguarding a collaborative process in IPP meetings²

- Remind the team of its common purpose and interest: the best educational programming for the child.
- Explore perspectives through statements like “You must have good reasons for that; tell us some of them,” “That seems important to you; help us understand why” or “Say some more about that; in what ways would that be helpful?”
- Clarify areas of agreement through statements like “We all want what is best for the child” or “We all want to make good use of our time.”
- Reframe negatives into more neutral statements: “He never follows through” could be rephrased as “You’d want to be able to trust that the plan would really be implemented.”
- Avoid technical terms and acronyms; clarify when necessary so everyone understands.
- Pay attention to nonverbal communication: body language, facial expressions, tones of voice.
- Watch for mental or emotional overload, and ask if you are not sure. Take a break if necessary or ask the person how the group can be most helpful.

2. Adapted from Nicholas R. M. Martin, *A Guide to Collaboration for IEP Teams* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2005), p. 38. Adapted by permission of Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

- If unproductive communication styles are demonstrated, support feelings, share the conflict and remind team members of the ground rules.
- Acknowledge and support team members' feelings, including feeling lost, rushed, disrespected or outnumbered.
- Make an agreement to speak up if at any time members have bad feelings that seem to be interfering with working together.
- Know and use strategies for resolving impasses if the team gets stuck.

Appendices

See Appendix 4-B for sample strategies for resolving impasses.

Expanding Your Network

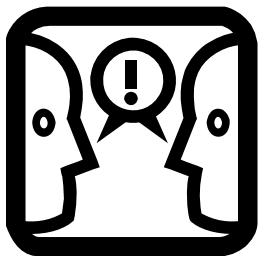
Teachers working with students with special education needs can increase their knowledge and resources by looking for support not only within the school system but throughout the community-at-large. There is a range of knowledge, advice and help available from other people, agencies and support services in the community. These connections can help dispel feelings of isolation and frustration, and can give teachers opportunities to build their knowledge base as well as share their knowledge and experiences with others.

Community agencies and groups

Community agencies can provide a range of support and information. There are many nonprofit organizations that can be found in the phone book or on the Internet whose prime mandate is to support children with special education needs. Many of these organizations offer lending libraries, informational sessions, and liaison and consultation services.

Learning opportunities

Various organizations and universities offer conferences, symposiums and presentations focusing on children with special education needs. These kinds of events can be valuable opportunities to learn about best practices and research. Consult community agencies and their newsletters, local newspapers or special interest publications for more information. Also consider joining professional organizations for educators working with students with special education needs. These organizations can be a valuable source of support, information and networking opportunities.



These tools are available in PDF format at www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/special_needs/resource.asp and on the CD-ROM packaged with the print version of this resource.

The purpose of these sample tools is to enrich the IPP process. These tools should be used selectively and can be adapted to best meet the needs of individual students. Many of these tools will be used informally as part of the IPP development process and not as products for the student's permanent school record.

4-A Sample Working Agreement for Collaboration

4-B Sample Strategies for Resolving Impasses



Appendix 4-A

Sample Working Agreement for Collaboration

We believe that ...

- everyone has expertise and wisdom
- everyone's voice needs to be heard
- everyone's time is valuable
- individual team members do not have to love a decision but they need to be able to live with it.

We will ...

- listen to understand
- work to find common threads and common ideas
- ask questions that are open and direct
- focus on solid information rather than emotions
- allow time for reflection and questions.

If the team is not able to find common threads and reach a decision that everyone can live with, we will ...

- identify the differences
- discuss reasons for differences
- if possible, identify what would need to change in order for all team members to support the decision.



Appendix 4-B

Sample Strategies for Resolving Impasses

Strategy

Admit that the group is at an impasse and invite suggestions.

Encourage participants to verbalize and clarify (without discussion at this point) what they see as obstacles: interests, feelings, expectations, assumptions, perceptions and so on.

Review the decision-making criteria.

Retrace the day's progress to re-establish a positive outlook.

Review the shared risks of leaving the matter unresolved versus the shared benefits of reaching an agreement.

Take a break.

Make agreements about the disagreements. If it seems clear that the impasse cannot be resolved that day, postpone the decision pending further thought and discussion; continue after further evaluation or consultation with other specialists; continue the discussions with a different mix of people or in a different setting; or request mediation.

Sample Statement

"We seem to be kind of stuck right now. Any suggestions for how we might move forward?"

"Would it make sense to go around the table and just hear from each person what they see as the obstacles to our consensus today?"

"What do you all think would be our best way of approaching this issue? On what basis do you think we should make this decision?"

"May I take a minute to summarize what we have agreed so far?"

"I think we would all like to leave here with a sense of completion and an IPP in place for next year, at least in an initial form. I know none of us want to go away frustrated with the feeling we haven't completed anything. How do other people feel about this?"

"I wonder if a 5-minute stretch break might be a good idea. What do you all think?"

"It seems clear that we are not in agreement about what extended school services are really necessary. What would you think about leaving this part undecided for now and talking more about this at our next meeting?"

Adapted from Nicholas R. M. Martin, *A Guide to Collaboration for IEP Teams* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2005), pp. 40–41. Adapted by permission of Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

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