

Effective Planning for Children With Special Needs

Research shows that effective entry-to-school planning for children with special needs occurs both at the community level and at the level of the individual child.

Planning at the Community Level

School boards need to work with community partners to develop procedures that will ensure a smooth school-entry process for children with special education needs. The actions school boards can take include, but are not limited to, the following:

- establishing and maintaining links with community partners
- encouraging parental involvement
- encouraging early notification
- developing a detailed protocol
- reviewing the entry-to-school process

The following sections provide details about each of these actions.

Establishing and Maintaining Links with Community Partners

- School boards identify and establish links with community agencies that provide services to preschool children and their families.
- Collaboration between school boards and community partners is initiated and supported at the senior levels of all participating organizations.
- All individuals involved with the entry-to-school process make a commitment to work together.
- Schools, school councils, and community agencies have regular, ongoing communication on a formal or informal basis.



“For all children ... partners include parents or guardians, caregivers, resource teachers, teacher assistants, other school personnel, and possibly representatives from daycare or pre-school services in the community. For children with special needs, partners may also include district staff and representatives and professionals from health and social service agencies.” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2003)



Examples of Effective Practice

School boards can:

- create and maintain a network of contacts with community agencies, organizations, and professionals who provide services to preschool children. A “system directory” listing the names, titles, and contact information of members of the network could be developed and kept up to date by school staff and made widely available to them;
- make presentations to community service providers outlining the school-entry planning process and identifying where their input is most vital;
- invite community agencies to set up displays, distribute literature, or make presentations at parent information evenings or school registration clinics. In addition, planning meetings with coterminous boards can lead to joint initiatives and shared understanding of the mandates of participating agencies;
- monitor new initiatives in health and social services and, as appropriate, work with these ministries, and with local agencies, to develop a protocol for helping the parents and their child gain access to relevant services;
- provide recognition for agencies that interact with schools by holding an “appreciation lunch” or a “community partner day”.

The Grey Bruce Children’s Alliance (see Appendix A.8) works to coordinate a variety of services for children, including the “Let’s Learn Clinics”, through which numerous local agencies and support services collaborate in school-entry planning.

Appendix A.9 (a letter directed to the Special Education Policy and Programs Branch) outlines the process used in the city of Hamilton for helping children with special needs make the transition into school. It demonstrates an effective collaborative partnership between coterminous school boards and community agencies.



Encouraging Parental Involvement

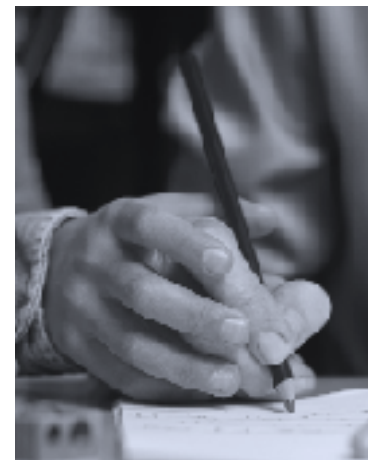
- School board staff invite parents to participate in the entry-to-school planning process and establish systems to allow their meaningful involvement throughout the process.
- School boards host parent information nights.
- School boards set up procedures for ensuring that parents have access to the information they require.

Examples of Effective Practice

School boards and/or schools can:

- host parent information evenings and hold early registration clinics. These events should be advertised in as broad a range of media as possible: community newspapers; local radio; newsletters of community organizations; the school board website; the principal's newsletter to parents and students; information boards at shopping malls, local supermarkets, and libraries;
- provide parents with barrier-free access to information meetings and information packages;
- translate school information into languages that are spoken in the community and provide interpreters, as required, at parent information nights and school registration clinics (see Appendix A.3);
- provide an information package answering frequently asked questions about school procedures and policies (e.g., alternate-day attendance and staggered-entry schedules; procedures related to safe arrival, transportation, inclement weather, snacks and lunch, recess, washroom breaks; policies related to parent volunteers, curriculum and assessment, report cards, parent-teacher interviews);
- provide parents with information on stages of early child development, expectations for learning ability, and tips on how to prepare their child for school. This may include information about thematic learning activities and age-appropriate vocabulary;

"Teachers, early childhood educators, members of the community, and families must work together to provide constructive and consistent learning experiences that will build students' confidence, encourage them to continue to see learning as both enjoyable and useful, and provide a strong foundation for their future intellectual, physical, and social development." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1998)



"A 'readiness to learn' measure (that covers development in physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language, general knowledge and cognitive skills) should be done at entry to school." (McCain and Mustard, 1999, p. 9)



Red Flags Early Identification Reference Guide for Infant, Toddler and Preschool Children (Red Flags)

is a quick reference guide for early years professionals. It can be used in conjunction with a validated screening tool, such as the Nipissing District Developmental Screens or the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. Red Flags outlines a range of functional indicators or domains commonly used to monitor healthy child development, as well as potential problem areas for child development. It is intended to assist in the determination of when and where to refer for additional advice, formal assessment, and/or treatment.

The Red Flags guide was produced by the York Region Early Identification Planning Coalition. To view this document, go to <http://www.region.york.on.ca>.

- ask parents to complete a developmental screening questionnaire that will help them to understand their child's stage of development;

The Nipissing District Developmental Screen is used by many of the "Healthy Babies Healthy Children" programs throughout the province (available online at <http://www.ndds.ca/>). The screen explores a child's skills in the following areas: vision, hearing, speech, language, communication, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, social/emotional, and self-help. The developmental screen is available in French, Spanish, and Chinese; translation into Vietnamese is under way. Age-appropriate activities to promote overall development accompany the screen. See Appendix A.10 for a description of the "Healthy Babies Healthy Children" program.

- encourage parents of a child with special needs to prepare a portfolio that includes current assessments, samples of the child's work, preschool reports, and a description of strategies used at home;

Appendix A.11 is a sample information kit for parents prepared by the École publique Héritage, Conseil scolaire public du Nord-Est de l'Ontario. It contains details about many school programs and procedures, including specific information related to allergies and medications.

- make parents of a child with special needs aware that members of the school board's Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) may be able to provide information about programs and services related to specific areas of exceptionality, such as school board or Provincial School programs for children who are deaf, blind, or deaf/blind. Additional information is available at <http://www.seaclearning.ca>.



Encouraging Early Notification

- School boards encourage community partners and parents to notify the board well in advance of a child's entry to school.
- Nine to twelve months before a child enters school, a community agency or the parent notifies the school board about the child, including information about any specific needs. This allows the school board and school to begin the planning process.
- School boards provide registration opportunities at the beginning of the planning process.

Nine-months' to twelve-months' lead time is recommended for all, to help school boards assess the resources needed, such as equipment, staff, and training, and to help parents prepare their children for entry to school.

Examples of Effective Practice

School boards and/or schools can:

- encourage agencies and preschool service providers to notify, with parental consent, the board-level special education coordinator or the school principal early in the fall about children with special needs who will be entering school the following September;
- prepare a handout for preschool service providers outlining the process and timelines for entry to school;
- conduct registration clinics in the schools as early as October or November of the year preceding the child's entry;
- advertise registration clinics on the radio; in newspapers; in school newsletters; on the school board's website; at shopping malls, local supermarkets, and libraries; through handouts distributed by preschool service providers; and through notices to community groups and Children's Rehabilitation Centres. If possible, provide information in the languages spoken in the community.



“An inter-agency committee to review and develop policies and procedures can benefit planning.” (Rous, Hemmeter, and Schuster, 1994, p. 381)



Developing a Detailed Protocol

- School boards work with community agencies to develop a written protocol for the school-entry process, with timelines, outlining the roles and responsibilities of parents and the various organizations.
- School boards share the protocol with staff of the board and the various community agencies.

Appendix A.12, “Steps to School”, is a brochure developed jointly by the Simcoe County District School Board, the Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board, and the Simcoe County Early Intervention System. The brochure outlines the transition process and offers tips for parents at each step of the process.

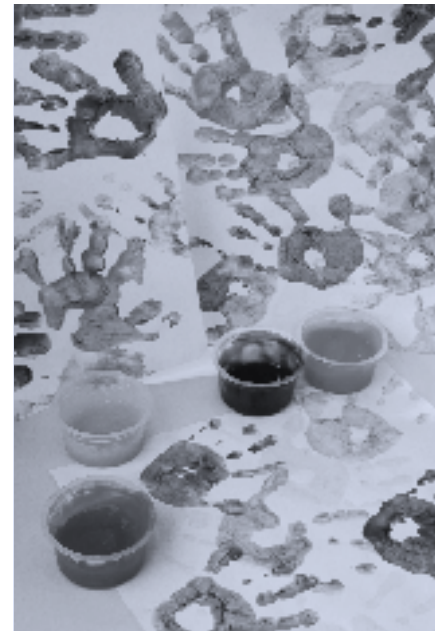
Examples of Effective Practice

School boards can:

- develop formal agreements with community service providers outlining the roles and responsibilities of school board staff and the various service providers;
- develop a protocol for entry-to-school planning, listing all the agencies and school boards participating in the protocol and addressing the following elements:
 - ◆ the time period covered by the agreement;
 - ◆ a statement of purpose for the agreement;
 - ◆ roles and responsibilities of the agencies and school boards that sign the agreement;
 - ◆ definitions of key terminology used in the protocol;
 - ◆ descriptions of the procedures for:
 - ❖ informing and supporting families through the transition;
 - ❖ gathering and sharing information and assessment results;
 - ❖ obtaining parental consent for the release of information to other agencies;



- ◆ time lines and responsibilities for:
 - ❖ determining eligibility for services;
 - ❖ providing services in both official languages, as needed;
 - ❖ writing the entry-to-school plan;
 - ❖ acquiring needed adaptive equipment or assistive technology;
 - ❖ providing training to staff on matters relating to special needs (e.g., use of adaptive equipment);
 - ❖ monitoring implementation of the plan.



Appendix A.13 is a sample entry plan for Kindergarten students with special needs used by the Rainbow District School Board.

Reviewing the Entry-to-School Process

- School boards or entry-to-school planning teams initiate regular evaluations of the entry-to-school process at the district or the local level to identify effective practices and assist in improving the process as needed.
- School boards (including their Special Education Advisory Committees) and community agencies formally review the entry-to-school protocol, as part of the school board's Special Education Plan, and make changes to the protocol, as required.
- School boards conduct informal reviews, as required.



Examples of Effective Practice

School boards can:

- invite community partners to provide ongoing input to the process. For example, following each registration clinic, school board staff can ask the parents and community partners for feedback;
- report back on the results of any process reviews so partners understand that their input has been heard and valued;
- conduct a formal review of the entry-to-school protocols, and make changes to the protocols as required.



Planning at the Level of the Individual Child

It is important for school boards and schools to ensure that each child is adequately prepared for and supported during the school-entry process. Actions that boards and/or schools can take include, but are not limited to, the following:

- appointing a lead person
- holding a case conference
- gathering information
- providing orientation opportunities
- providing training for school staff
- reviewing the entry-to-school process

The following sections provide details about each of these actions.



Appointing a Lead Person

A lead person (called a “navigator” in some school boards) may be appointed by the school board to coordinate entry-to-school planning and implementation. It is this lead person who initiates communication with the parents.

Examples of Effective Practice

School boards can:

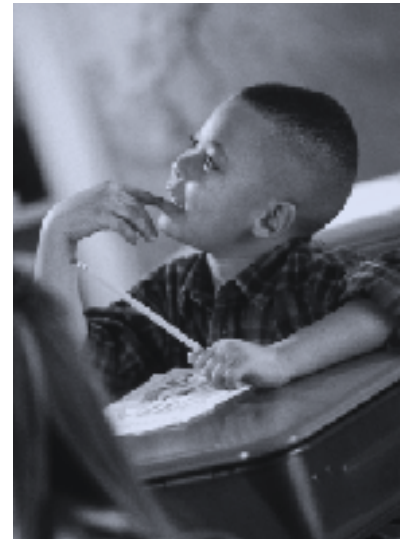
- designate an individual to be responsible for coordinating the entry-to-school planning for each child with special needs. This lead person may be the school board special education coordinator, the school principal, the special education resource teacher, the classroom teacher, or a community service provider.

Appendix A.14, “The Welcome Checklist for Elementary Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders”, sets out the steps a “lead person” might follow to prepare all parties for the entry to school of a child with special needs.

Holding a Case Conference

- The lead person initiates a case conference involving community agency staff, the classroom teacher, the school principal, special education staff, and the parents.
- During the case conference, participants:
 - ◆ share copies of relevant assessment results and other helpful information from the child’s preschool file for the school’s records (with parental consent);
 - ◆ identify the strengths and needs of the child;
 - ◆ develop a written plan for preparing the child to make a smooth entry to school.

In most cases, parents coordinate their child’s entry to school. For children with special needs, however, because of the number of different service providers who could be involved, a designated coordinator may be necessary. In Saskatchewan, for example, the nature of the child’s needs and established relationships determines whether a lead person is appointed.



“A formal inter-agency committee may review the needs of the child and assess what resources are needed to facilitate entry-to-school planning.” (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2002)



Examples of Effective Practice

The lead person:

- chairs a planning case conference. Attendees might include:
 - ◆ the special education resource teacher;
 - ◆ the classroom teacher;
 - ◆ the parents;
 - ◆ the school board special education consultant;
 - ◆ preschool service providers;
- uses the minutes of the meeting as the basis for writing a detailed, individual, entry-to-school plan specifying roles, responsibilities, goals, action steps, and timelines;
- arranges for the recording of minutes;
- uses the plan developed in the case conference as the starting point for the initial Individual Education Plan (IEP) once the child enters school.

Gathering Information

- School staff visit the preschool setting to observe both the child and the strategies being used with the child by service providers.

Examples of Effective Practice

School staff can:

- provide templates and tools (such as questionnaires, developmental checklists, record-keeping organizers) to assist community partners and parents in providing information about the child. This may include information about special needs and required accommodations, as well as successful strategies used to date;



- ask parents and/or preschool service providers to complete a “preschool screening booklet” or other questionnaire that might include scales for development of social, speech and language, fine, and gross motor skills by age, along with family information, environmental considerations, current abilities, and family concerns;

For an example of a preschool screening tool, “Fair Start Preschool Screening Approach”, go to <http://www.fairstart.ca>. The “Fair Start” screening is used by the Lakehead District School Board, the Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board, and the Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Aurores boréales as a part of Junior Kindergarten registration for schools in Thunder Bay. Appendix A.15 provides a description of this screening tool.

- at an information night or registration clinic, demonstrate for parents how to prepare a portfolio for a child with special needs, including current assessments, samples of work, preschool reports, and a description of strategies used at home;
- encourage preschool service providers to complete a detailed exit report on each child with special needs leaving their service (with parental permission);

See Appendix A.16 for a protocol to assist parents in registering children with specific learning needs. (This sample protocol was developed jointly by the Conseil scolaire de district catholique des Grandes Rivières, community agencies, and Centre Jules-Léger.)

- coordinate with local health agencies to ensure early screening of children to identify needs related to hearing, speech, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and learning ability;
- host a networking opportunity to enable members of the child’s preschool to meet with school board and/or school staff members to review the information package on the child and share insights and strategies;
- facilitate visits by the classroom teacher and/or special education resource teacher to observe the child in his or her preschool setting.

An “Early Years Transition Planning Inventory” is provided in the Government of Manitoba’s guidelines for planning entry to school for children with special needs. The inventory is completed by parents or preschool agencies and includes a variety of forms for recording information and authorizing the disclosure of information about the child to the school board. The inventory can be downloaded from http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/spcedu/protocol/pdf/early_childhood.pdf. (Healthy Child Manitoba, 2002)

The collection, use, and disclosure of personal information about students is governed by the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which applies to school boards. In addition, the Education Act and the *Ontario Student Record (OSR) Guideline, 2000* govern the creation of and access to the Ontario Student Record (OSR). The Personal Health Information Protection Act, 2004 (Bill 31) does not generally apply to school boards, although it may cover some of the professionals who work at the school board, whether or not they are school board employees. When sharing information about students with community agencies, preschool service providers, and others, and among staff members, school boards should be cognizant of the rules imposed by these acts.





“Children with special needs are at risk of being uninvolved in decision making, uninvolved in their community life and generally unable to lead fulfilling lives” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2003).

Providing Orientation Opportunities

- Some schools’ plans identify opportunities for children and parents to visit the school prior to school entry, to meet staff and practise routines.

Examples of Effective Practice

Before school starts, school staff can:

- arrange visits to the school and classroom for the child and parents, perhaps in conjunction with a special event at the school. Some children with special needs may benefit from a series of visits to familiarize themselves with the new environment and practise new routines;
- familiarize children with their transportation to and from school;
- address correspondence about school entry to the child, in care of the parents;
- for children with special needs, prepare a “social story book” that the parents can review with the child prior to school entry. This could include photos of the school, classroom, teacher, playground, washroom, and so on. If appropriate, a video or audiotape might be supplied for children with special needs;

Appendix A.17 is a description, with samples, of a “social story book” developed to assist children with special needs entering school.

- arrange for staggered entry, so that children can begin attending school in small groups before the class is at full size. For example, a class of twenty Junior Kindergarten students could start in groups of five each day for four days, with all twenty attending on the fifth school day.



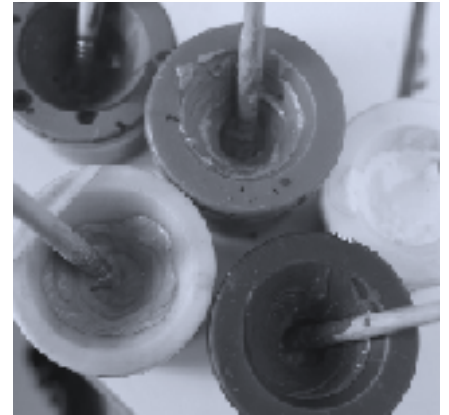
Providing Training for School Staff

- School boards provide training for school staff to familiarize them with effective intervention strategies and the use of assistive devices.

Examples of Effective Practice

School boards can:

- provide workshops for teachers, before the start of school, focusing on the special needs of the children who will be entering their classrooms;
- provide training for teachers on specific strategies and equipment for children with special needs who will be entering their classrooms (e.g., adaptive equipment, assistive devices, specialized computer hardware or software);
- hold a meeting with the school-based special education resource teacher and the receiving teacher to discuss needs and strategies. Other participants might include the parents, the principal, and school board office staff.



Reviewing the Entry-to-School Process

- Schools review and revise individual entry-to-school plans and procedures, as required.

Examples of Effective Practice

Schools can:

- provide parents with a survey to complete after participating in a registration clinic, and again one month after the child has started school, to gather information about the effectiveness of the school-entry process. The school should report back to parents on the results of this feedback so they understand that their input has been noted and valued;
- conduct informal reviews of the process, as necessary. This could involve interviews with staff, parents, and community partners;
- review the school-entry plans for individual children and revise them as required.

For children with special needs, the review process generally involves additional participants, such as representatives from preschool agencies. The school-entry team or individual student planning team should identify strategies for monitoring and evaluating the child's preparation for school entry.

