

Setting the Direction for Special Education

Phase 1 Community Consultation What We Heard Summary Report

Prepared by Calder Bateman Communications for Alberta Education



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Introduction

In the fall of 2007, Alberta Education embarked on a review of the severe disabilities profile funding structure. In part, as a result of these findings, the Minister of Education committed to developing a new framework for special education that would include vision, principles, policy direction, accountability measures and a funding distribution formula. The initiative called Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta was established in the spring of 2008 and is intended to lead the creation of a new paradigm for special education to serve school authorities in their work to support students with special education needs.

The Primary Aims of Setting the Direction for Special Education are:

- Develop a special education framework that includes vision, principles, policy direction, accountability measures and a funding distribution formula.
- Enable effective dialogue with Albertans through a broad-based public consultation process over the duration of this initiative.
- Begin implementing parts of the Setting the Direction framework in the 2010/2011 school year.

The Role of the Steering Committee

The role of the Steering Committee is to guide and act as ambassadors for the initiative. Members have been drawn from a variety of perspectives: regional, education, medical, community, business, post-secondary, provincial, and elected. Members were identified through their many contributions to the community. Committee members will examine a cross-section of ideas, research and best practices, as well as bring their own knowledge and experiences to this initiative. This will all be synthesized into a report that will be submitted to the Minister of Education.

As we move towards Phase 3 of Setting the Direction, your input will provide valuable information to the Steering Committee and influence a series of recommendations around development of the framework for Special Education in Alberta that includes policy, accountability measures and a funding distribution mechanism. Part of the final report will examine resourcing for Special Education, but within the context of a robust yet nimble policy framework to guide the future of Special Education in our province.

Steering Committee recommendations are provided to the Minister of Education and Government for final consideration prior to implementation.

Public Consultation – Three Phases

Public consultation plays a key role in the development of a new special education framework and a three-phased consultation approach has been developed to involve Albertans in the discussion.

- Phase 1 - Development of the Framework's vision and principles. November/December 2008.
- Phase 2 – Development of options for Special Education policy, accountability and funding. February/March 2009.
- Phase 3 – Two-day Minister's Forum for the purpose of gathering input from a diverse range of key stakeholder groups to respond to the Framework and begin discussions about implementation. June 8 & 9, 2009.

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive summary of what we heard in the Phase 1 consultation, so that it can inform the development of a proposed Vision, Mission and Principles that will be taken to stakeholders in Phase 2.



Putting this Report into Context

Every attempt was made for Albertans to participate in the discussion about the future for special education. Advertisements inviting citizens to become involved in consultations were procured from Alberta’s nine major daily newspapers. Media releases were distributed to all outlets throughout the province. The web site (and its discussion questions) was promoted to all school authorities and other stakeholder groups. The summary of information provided in this community consultation report gives a comprehensive overview of the perspectives offered by those who either attended the community consultations or who completed the questionnaire online or in handwritten form. Not surprisingly, those Albertans who availed themselves of the opportunity to participate are predominantly people with a stake in Special Education issues. Based on the self-identifying questions posed in the survey, this report represents an inventory of perspectives from those individuals or groups who are connected either directly or indirectly to the special needs realm.

Consultation Method – Phase 1

Throughout November and December 2008, Albertans were invited to participate in the Phase 1 Consultation through the following consultation methods:

- A **public survey** was conducted through an online and hardcopy questionnaire, available in both French and English. The purpose of the public survey was to gather input and measure the strength of Albertans’ ideas, expectations and assumptions about Special Education in Alberta. A total of 1,644 questionnaires were completed, including 806 online and 838 print copy. Over half of respondents (54%) were teachers or school administrators. One quarter (26%) were parents, including 152 or 10% who were parents of students with special needs. Other respondents included support staff (7%), service providers (2%) and school authority representatives (2%). Seventeen students (1%) completed the questionnaire. Open-ended question responses (“qualitative data”) were reviewed coded and entered, along with closed-ended question data (“quantitative data”), into SPSS 16.0 for collation and analysis.

See Appendix A – Discussion Guide Questions

- **Community consultation sessions** were held across Alberta in November and December 2008. The purpose of the community consultation sessions was to get a sense of stakeholders’ current perceptions of Special Education in Alberta, and to contribute to the development of a Vision and associated Principles for Special Education in Alberta. Session participants included parents, teachers, school officials, other stakeholders and members of the public. A total of 18 consultation sessions involving 1088 participants were held. Session proceedings were recorded by notetakers. Written notes were then reviewed, coded and entered into SPSS 16.0 for collation and analysis.

See Appendix B – Consultation Session Format

Youth Involvement

During Phase 1, Setting the Direction had a presence in Speak Out, the Alberta student engagement initiative. For the month of December, special education was identified as the profile topic on the Speak Out website (www.speakout.alberta.ca). A number of discussion topics that related directly to special education and the work of Phase 1 were established. The discussion netted some interesting information that is germane to the discussion.

In the discussion forums, students stressed the importance of being recognized for their successes whether they have special education needs or not. They also told us that services and supports have to be in place to help students find success and that communities need to be supportive and inclusive.

A blog entry was also posted that discussed the high school completion certificate and celebrating student success. Finally, a poll question was placed that asked students “What should be the main goal of special education in Alberta?” 119 students responded to the poll and the results are below:

What should be the main goal of special education in Alberta?	
- Help ALL students to finish high school.	22%
- Give extra help to students who need it.	17%
- Support students to reach their highest potential.	48%
- Reduce problems in the classroom.	13%

There are 501 student members of the Speak Out community.



What We Heard

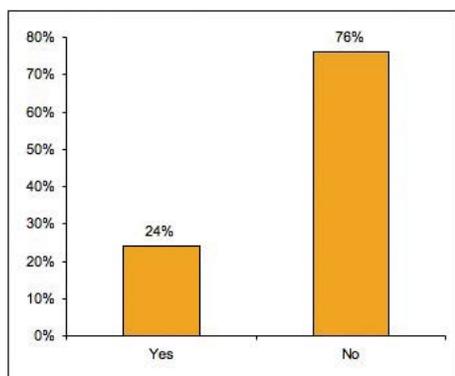
1. Environmental Scan

Although the purpose of the project, Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta, is to engage stakeholders in the process of creating a new framework for Special Education, we need to understand the current system – its strengths and challenges – before embarking in a new direction. In the public survey, this effort was called the “Big Picture”; in the consultation sessions it was called an Environmental Scan. In both cases, participants were asked to assess the state of the current Special Education system in Alberta.

In the consultation sessions and public survey, participants expressed their frustrations and concerns about the current system, and suggested specific changes that could be made to optimize Special Education in Alberta.

Some of the most passionate input was put forth by parents –many of whom have worked tirelessly to ensure that their child receives the best possible learning supports. Many parents talked about their own family sacrifices: parents giving up their own careers to stay at home and support their child with special needs; the needs of siblings being overshadowed by the needs of a brother or sister with special needs; social isolation caused when parents “took on” systems for needed supports for their child with special needs. Parents sometimes spoke of many painful experiences faced by their special needs child including social ridicule and alienation at the hands of other children and sometimes from parents of non-special needs children who viewed classroom diversity as an obstacle to classroom learning. On the other hand, many parents spoke sincerely about the dedication of teachers and paraprofessionals and their demonstrated commitment. Many parents sympathized with teachers over the challenge of leading diverse classrooms with limited supports and often limited expertise.

Figure 1: “Do you think we have an effective approach to Special Education in Alberta?” (n=1499)



Survey respondents were asked directly, “Do you think we have an effective approach to Special Education in Alberta?” As shown in Figure 1, the majority of respondents (76%) said “No, Alberta does not have an effective approach to Special Education.” They were then asked to rate a set of factors for creating a successful framework and to identify the greatest challenge to making changes or setting a new direction for Special Education in Alberta. Results are shown in Figure 2 (p. 8) and Figure 3 (p. 10), and summarized along with results from the consultation sessions in sections 1.1 and 1.2 below.

There was a remarkable degree of consistency in results across methods and respondent groups, which may indicate the presence of some broad, systemic issues. The overall sentiment was that we need a truly functioning, inclusive system that supports students with special needs along with all the other students in the classroom. We need to recognize that each child is unique and that all children deserve to have the support they need to achieve their potential. This point was articulated very clearly by parents who talked about the frequent attempts by systems to apply a “one-size fits all” approach to teaching and learning for their child. Many parents and teachers themselves felt that our Special Education system should build a seamless and integrated system of supports that puts the child first, rather than our own requirements for coding and paperwork.

The following sections summarize the major factors for a successful framework for Special Education and the key challenges to putting it into practice.



1.1 Factors for a Successful Framework

• Provision of Support Services

We heard that Special Education is a multi-disciplinary, cross-departmental and multi-level responsibility that includes Education, Health and Wellness, Mental Health, Children and Youth Services, municipalities (e.g., Family and Community Support Services) and non-governmental organizations that provide community and family services. Besides teachers, a whole team of professionals is required to help students with special education needs reach their individual potential.

Participants said there are not enough ancillary support professionals like Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologists and others working in the Special Education system. Parents and school administrators alike spoke of their frustration in accessing ancillary supports for children with special needs—this was particularly evident in small community settings and particularly in northern Alberta, which has experienced unprecedented growth and development. The concept of wraparound support, where students with special education needs have seamless support from a team of specialized professionals, is not currently the practice in Alberta. Parents spoke of their frustrations of running their children to a range of medical appointments often pulling children from their classrooms in order that they receive the services they need.

They said students need more time with teaching assistants. Some participants observed that teaching assistants assigned to students with special education needs in a regular classroom often function as general teaching assistants rather than as support professionals for their assigned students. Parents and teachers (and teacher assistants themselves) talked about the challenges of not having professional standards in place for teaching assistants and the fact that this is likely lessening the learning potential for children to whom they provide support. A corollary concern was that teaching assistants do not receive adequate compensation or prestige that acknowledges the high level of skill and dedication required to do the work well.

Survey respondents rated “provision of support services” as the most important factor for creating a successful framework for a new Special Education policy in Alberta ($\mu=4.71$ – see Figure 2).

• Effective Teaching

Teachers work hard to juggle all of the competing demands on their time and energy, and most participants did not attribute systemic shortcomings to individual teachers. Many participants said teachers are overwhelmed by the diverse set of expectations placed on them, and in many cases don't have enough time to do their jobs effectively. Parents in particular recounted stories of teachers who went above and beyond to support their child's learning needs yet many indicated a level of frustration of working with teachers and administrators who lack the expertise or resources to deliver an effective education for their child.

Most participants feel that teachers do not receive the training they need to teach in a Special Education environment. When asked to suggest other factors for a successful framework, effective and comprehensive teacher education and training was mentioned most often by survey participants (162 mentions). This suggestion was echoed in the consultation sessions with a call for pre-service training for classroom teachers in university and ongoing professional development of classroom teachers, teaching assistants and other professionals working in Special Education. Some suggested that a Special Education course should be a graduation requirement for an education degree.

Survey respondents rated “effective teaching” as the second most important factor for creating a successful framework for a new Special Education policy in Alberta ($\mu=4.67$ – see Figure 2).

• Prompt and Accurate Assessment of Students

Participants said the early identification and intervention are important factors in Special Education. While they are not against assessment and coding processes per se, parents in particular had an ambivalent relationship to coding. On the one hand, they acknowledged that coding ensured appropriate funding for their child but they also resented the resulting label and stigma that emerged from the coding.



Prompt and accurate assessment of students was rated very important by survey respondents as a factor for creating a successful framework for Special Education ($\mu=4.6$ – see Figure 2); however, categorizing students using the current coding criteria was rated lowest by respondents ($\mu=3.21$ – see Figure 2). These results put numbers to what we heard from participants: they want to see all students with Special Education needs identified and provided with appropriate services and supports as quickly as possible, without getting bogged down in coding and paperwork. The time it takes for assessment and coding under the current system can create detrimental delays. Parents spoke of the value of early assessments—many indicating that had their child been assessed earlier in life, more learning benefits could have been reaped.

Participants said the Special Education system needs to be student-focused rather than coding-focused. What is needed is a model where each student receives programming and support according to their specific individual needs, not according to their code. Some feel that coding criteria is restrictive and dehumanizing. They say that definitions and coding should take into account the whole student (emotional, physical, cognitive, spiritual), as well as the student's environment. While participants acknowledged that experts should make the diagnoses, some suggested that teachers and administrators could play a central role in identification and intervention, not relying solely on coding criteria and processes.

- **Comprehensive Programming for Students**

Once students with special education needs are identified, they require comprehensive programming that is consistent, appropriate, individualized and integrated to help them achieve their maximum potential. They also need good curriculum and resource materials, developed with expertise.

Comprehensive programming for students was rated highly by survey participants ($\mu=4.59$ – see Figure 2) as a factor in creating a successful framework for Special Education policy, but participants did not offer a single definition for “comprehensive.” For some, comprehensive programming meant “comprehensive for the individual student,” capable of meeting all of that student's needs; for others, it meant comprehensive across all students with special education needs, capable of responding to a diversity of needs.

At an individual level, comprehensive programming means special education supports and services are available throughout that student's school career. Participants said such comprehensive support is needed to increase high school completion among students with special needs and/or to prepare them for the next step (e.g. work, post-secondary, independent living). Furthermore, parents specifically spoke of a sense of societal abandonment once their children left the school system in that there was little in place to provide for a successful transition into the world of work or into post-secondary education.

At a population level, participants said there should be equitable access to consistent programs, regardless of where the student lives. Participants from smaller centres said Special Education programming and services are more difficult to obtain in rural settings. They felt that services should be available in community schools but if that is not possible then good transportation must be provided.

Some participants were concerned that gifted children were being forgotten by the Special Education system, noting that most of the focus is on children at the highest-need end of the spectrum. They said that there needs to be a consistent definition of Special Education, one that recognizes that gifted and artistically-talented students also have special needs. One parent specifically spoke of the frustration of having anyone within her child's school view the gifted learner as a legitimate element of the special education world.

A number of participants pointed to the lack of coordinated services in Special Education. They said every grade level, every support professional and every program for children with special education needs tends to operate in some degree of isolation. While many of those who work in Special Education said they were familiar with the concept of coordinated service, few felt that it currently exists on a large scale. There was also awareness that such a system is difficult to establish and maintain, but coordinating services was seen as an ideal model to work towards. Parents spoke with great frustration about the need to continually repeat information about their child's special needs to a myriad of service providers. One suggestion was to ensure student records clearly



indicate code, program and/or needs, to allow for seamless intra-provincial transfers. Another suggestion was that schools have a Special Education Coordinator/Counselor/Expert and/or Learning Teams who could be a resource for classroom teachers, parents and other providers, while ensuring comprehensiveness and continuity in individual student programming.

- **Funding Distribution**

As with any government program, funding for Special Education must be appropriately allocated to ensure program goals are achieved. Not surprisingly, then, survey participants rated funding distribution as very important ($\mu=4.55$ – see Figure 2) and consultation session participants frequently raised the issue of funding in their discussions.

The issue of funding predominated in both the survey and in the community consultations but both groups spoke as often about the distribution of resources as about funding itself. Many people, including parents, said that the key to building an effective Special Education framework was not necessarily throwing more money at the system. They also said the funding model must aid and not impede implementation of a new direction. For example, there must be sufficient funding to purchase new technology and tools for Special Education. The funding framework needs to be flexible, allowing schools to adapt to differences in student needs, and funds need to be allocated separately for diagnoses and program delivery.

- **Meaningful Monitoring of Classroom Success**

Survey participants believed that meaningful monitoring of classroom success as a moderately high element ($\mu=4.33$ – see Figure 2) in creating a new Special Education framework. This issue was addressed both directly and indirectly in the community consultations when parents spoke about maximizing potential learning in their child’s educational experience. While teachers and administrators cited the importance of classroom assessment, some spoke about the limited applicability of standardized measurement tools. All participants, however, felt that establishing methods of assessing student success was essential if a special education framework is to be successfully delivered.

- **Comprehensive Data Collection/Sharing**

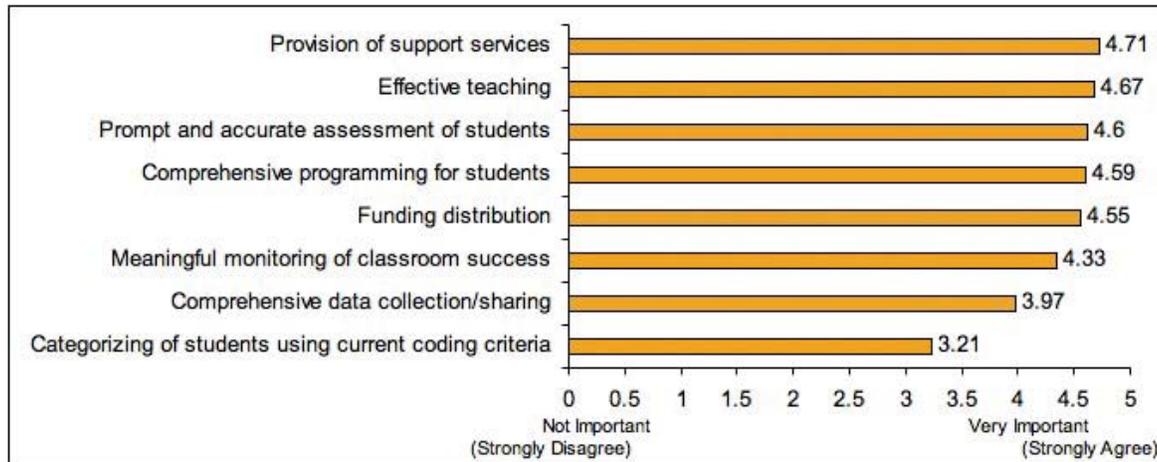
The need for evidence-based programming and decision-making was raised by both survey respondents and consultation session participants, whether they were discussing factors for a successful framework, challenges to implementation, what students need or a new vision, mission and principles for Special Education in Alberta. However, it did not receive the same emphasis that other factors received. Participants said the new direction for Special Education has to be based on research and evidence of what works. They said we need to identify and develop best practices and put them into standard use in Alberta. This would require developing reliable, generally accepted evaluation tools and using them to collect and analyze longitudinal data.

- **Categorizing of Students Using Current Coding Criteria**

Parents and teachers alike felt that the current model of support codes children with special needs and then treats them uniformly according to the code. The issue of coding criteria scored an element ($\mu=3.21$ – see Figure 2) in the online survey and was also present in the community consultations where parents especially articulated criteria concerns and the resulting stigma of being coded.



Figure 2: How important do you think the following factors are in creating a successful framework for a new Special Education Policy? (Mean on a 5-point scale, from Not Important/Strongly Disagree = 0 to Very Important/Strongly Agree = 5.)



1.2 Key Issues and Challenges

• Responsibility and Accountability

Responsibility and accountability were major themes in the consultation sessions and clearly a challenge to making changes or setting a new direction. Participants said there is a perceived lack of accountability throughout the Special Education system. No one has a specific responsibility to ensure the start-to-finish school success of children with special needs. In addition, there is often no recourse for parents who are confronted with difficult and unhelpful system administrators. Parents spoke of inconsistency of accountability not only between school districts but sometimes within schools themselves. The new framework for Special Education should explicitly spell out who – including government, district, board, school, teacher and parent – has responsibility for what in the system.

On the other hand, participants were concerned with the burdensome paper work that has created the current unwieldy and unresponsive system. There was a strong sentiment that education should be about people and not paper, and that the way the system is currently administered leads to a somewhat myopic focus on forms and paperwork. One participant remarked “the accountants are strangling the system.” Teachers and paraprofessionals talked about the “endless” and sometimes needless amounts of paperwork required and how this time would be better used supporting the child.

• Funding and Resources

The most commonly held belief among consultation participants and survey respondents was that more funding is required throughout the Special Education system. If there was one area of consensus among stakeholders, it was here. Participants said funding for Special Education must be long-term, reliable, sustainable, consistent and widely supported by the general public.

According to survey respondents (see Figure 3), ensuring adequate funding will be the biggest challenge to making changes or setting a new direction for Special Education in Alberta. Over one in three respondents (41%) said that providing reliable and sustainable funding would be the greatest challenge, 22% said it would be overcoming the lack of support and resources for teachers, while 17% said it would be developing a funding model that aligns with program expectations, that is, one that is flexible, time-sensitive and capable of addressing increasing numbers of students and severity of needs.

• Professionals and Service Providers

As noted above, provision of support services and effective teaching are important factors in creating a successful framework for a new Special Education policy. At least 10% of survey respondents said a shortage of professionals to identify and document students will be a



significant challenge (see Figure 3), This issue was well-articulated by parents in the community consultations.

Consultation session participants also talked about the current shortage of professionals to identify and document students with special needs, including psychologists, speech pathologists and education assistants. They also pointed to the shortage of professionals to deliver Special Education programs and services in the classroom, including teachers, teaching assistants, counselors, medical practitioners, occupational therapists and other service providers. They said government needs to commit to the development and retention of Special Education professionals. Almost one in four survey respondents (22%) said providing proper training for teachers and other Special Education professionals in universities would be a challenge (see Figure 3). This issue was shared between teachers and administrators and parents.

• **Building Stakeholder Consensus**

Balancing stakeholder needs and building consensus among stakeholders for proposed changes to the direction of Special Education in Alberta will present a significant challenge. Participants said it will take time to build the necessary partnerships among government, schools, and health, social and community agencies that are needed to implement a new policy. Current philosophical approaches and long-standing practices will need to be examined and, where necessary, modified to meet the needs of a new direction. This issue was particularly profound for parents who live and experience a system that is not based in collaboration.

• **Providing Consistent, Differentiated Programs to a Diverse Student Population**

There was a general sentiment among participants that inclusion in regular classrooms is a positive experience for children with special needs, but that inclusion must be meaningful and appropriately supported. Without access to the necessary supports, a child with special education needs may be included in a regular classroom but remain socially, intellectually and emotionally isolated. While many parents spoke to the value of meaningful inclusion, there was a very clear sentiment in the community consultation that inclusion be offered as an option and not prescribed.

The tension between inclusion and meeting individual needs was captured by survey respondents who identified three somewhat conflicting challenges (see Figure 3):

- Providing consistent Special Education programs and supports across the province (13%)
- Providing sufficiently differentiated programs to meet the diversity of student needs (13%)
- Supporting the most vulnerable learners (10%)

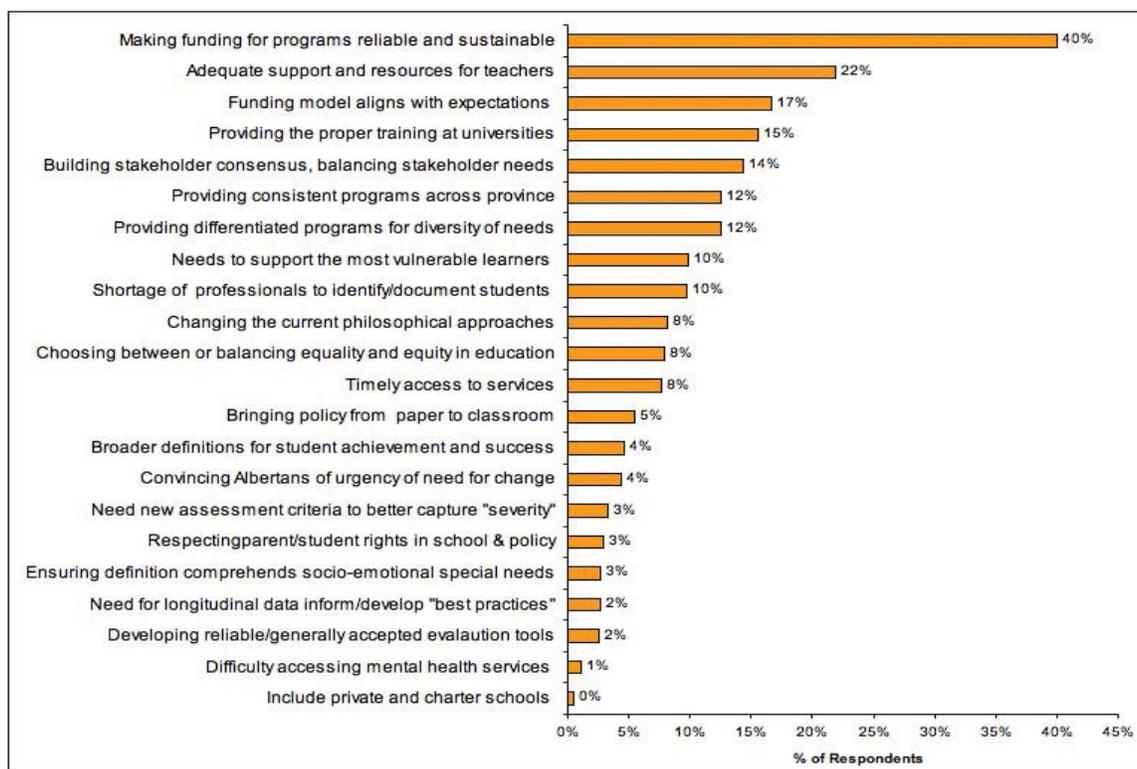
Although one name is used to describe it – Special Education – the inclusion versus segregation debate illustrates the complexity of developing one system to meet a diversity of needs. Some participants addressed this complexity by saying we need to find a balance between equality and equity in education, including finding a balance between meeting the needs of students with special education needs and those of all other students in a school. In community consultations parents indicated support for choice with regards to inclusion.

• **Timely Access to Services**

Challenges like a shortage of professionals and funding allocations will make it difficult to provide timely access to consistent and comprehensive services for students with special education needs, wherever they live in Alberta. At least 8% of survey respondents said that, despite our best intentions in setting a new direction for Special Education in Alberta, there will remain real barriers to service delivery. The issue of timely access was broached by both parents and teachers many of whom talked to the frequency of delays and their deleterious impact on student learning.



Figure 3: What do you think is the greatest challenge to making changes or setting a new direction for special education in Alberta? (n=1,595)



2. Vision

A vision for Special Education in Alberta is a picture of an ideal future that sets direction, inspires creativity and provides opportunities for all students. It should describe how the future will be different than today. Both survey respondents and consultation session participants were invited to imagine an ideal future for Special Education.

In the consultation sessions, participants discussed their visions for Special Education and proposed a wide range of images and ideas. In general, proposed visions fell into two broad categories: 1) those that imagined a fundamentally different system and sought significant changes to the status quo, and 2) those that sought to modify the current system to make it more effective and accessible.

Survey respondents were asked to envision the future of Special Education in Alberta, first from the perspective of students with special education needs and then from the perspective of the system and what we, as a province, should be striving to achieve. Their ideas are presented in Figure 4 (p. 12) and Figure 5 (p. 14).

Again, the major themes were consistent across consultation sessions and consultation methods, although emphasis varied. These themes are summarized below in sections 2.1 and 2.2.

2.1 What Students Need

• Sufficient, Well-trained Teachers and Support Staff

Almost half (48%) of survey respondents and many consultation session participants envisioned a Special Education system that has sufficient well-trained teachers and other staff to provide for the needs of individual students. To achieve this vision, they said there needs to be effective and comprehensive pre-service education and training for teachers and support staff, as well as ongoing professional development.



- **Welcoming and Inclusive Schools and Classrooms**

Students with Special Education needs want what all students want: to feel accepted and understood in their school and classroom. Participants envisioned schools that are welcoming and safe for all students, where diversity is obviously valued and where students with special education needs are not stigmatized but, instead, can find peer acceptance and social interaction. This issue was particularly profound for parents who reinforced the relationship between a child's comfort level and their aptitude to learn. Many parents said if you don't provide a welcoming environment for children with special needs, the rest is for naught.

To achieve safe and welcoming environments, participants said we need to pay more than lip service to inclusion. Inclusion must not be about arbitrarily placing every type of child in every type of classroom or every type of school. Rather, inclusion must be conceptualized within the paradigm of respect and appreciation for a child's dignity, abilities, uniqueness and contributions, and the desire to enable every child to maximize her/his full potential, whatever that may be. This means that we need better teacher training, better physical facilities, effective classroom teaching, appropriate pay for staff, widespread knowledge of disabilities and conditions of students, classrooms built on universal design principles and appropriate class sizes. A commitment to providing supportive and inclusive environments must be demonstrated at all levels – provincial, district, school and classroom.

- **Choice**

Although inclusion should always be available as a choice where appropriate, participants said inclusion and integration are not the solution for everyone. Their vision for Special Education is a system that offers true choice to students and families. That means choices within and among school authority types and programming options such as public and separate schools, Francophone schools, charter schools, private schools, alternative programs, distance learning and home education. However, choice must not be considered in a vacuum. Parental and student choice of school placement and programming ought to be considered in consort with teachers and school officials, and relevant community service providers. Sufficient staff and resources for individual programming are needed to enable students with Special Education needs to learn at their own level, achieve their potential and develop independence.

- **Collaboration and Multi-disciplinary Teams**

The best Special Education system will be achieved through meaningful collaboration between school, home and community. Participants envisioned a system marked by positive and cooperative – rather than adversarial – relationships between government, administration, teachers, families and service providers. They said effective collaboration requires commitment and support, including funded meetings. Participants also recognized the importance of multi-disciplinary teams in the delivery of Special Education programs and services, including the need to involve students' families and support systems. Some parents talked about feeling excluded from discussion about their child's learning situation. Parents, guardians and/or other members of a student's support system must be included in the Special Education process, from identification and assessment through to program completion.

The issue of collaboration was an issue for members of Alberta's Aboriginal community. While education remains a federal responsibility under Canada's *Indian Act*, seeking ways to strengthen the relationship between the provincial and federal government is essential if we are to be more effective in supporting all of Alberta's children.

- **Advocacy**

Many parents and caregivers expressed frustration with the current Special Education system, as it requires them to spend a significant amount of time and energy advocating for their children. They envision a Special Education system that, at a minimum, shares the advocacy role with families and has mechanisms in place to ensure the needs of each child are met as students move through the system.



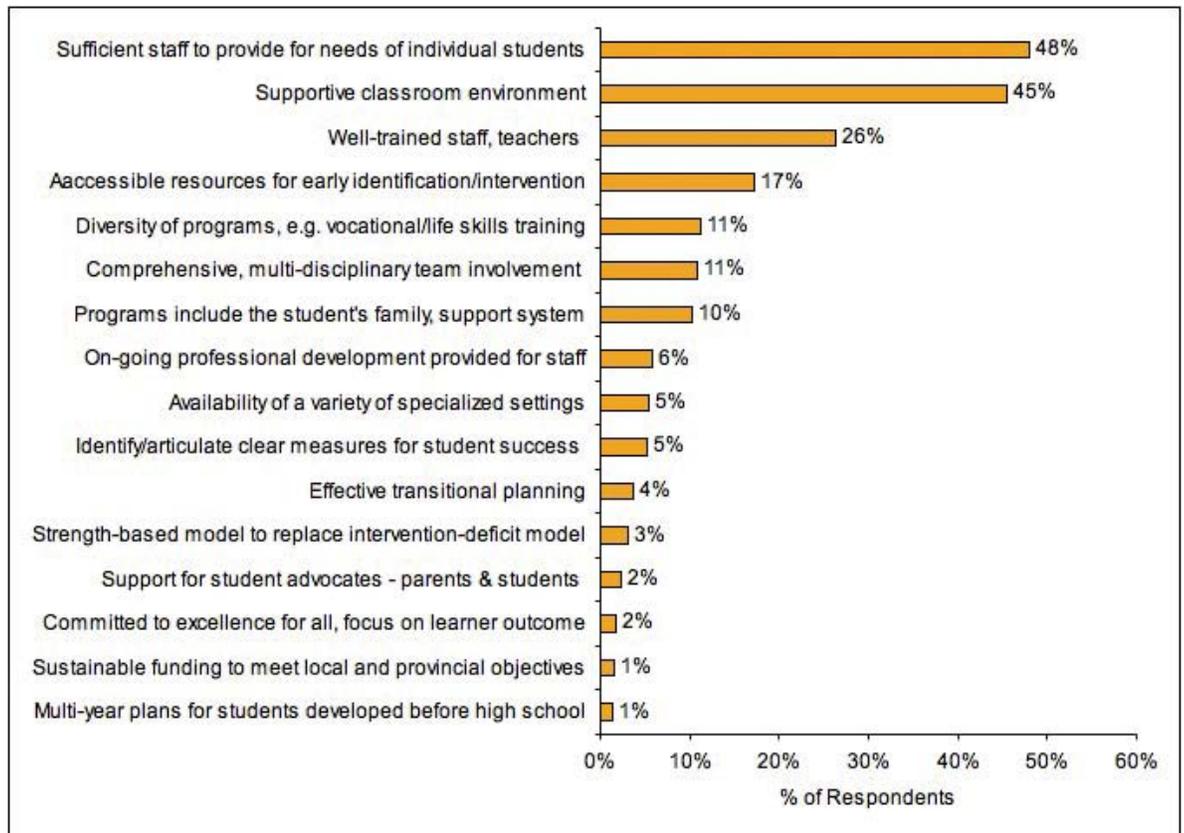
- **Effective Transitional Planning**

Although transitional planning was mentioned by only 4% of survey respondents as something students need to be successful, it was mentioned frequently by consultation session participants. Participants said there is a lack of continuity in the transitions from year to year, and a greater lack of continuity in the transitions from elementary to junior high, junior high to high school, and high school to post-school life. A more integrated connection from one program to the next would decrease the stress felt by students with Special Education needs and their families, and facilitate a more effective learning career.

- **Holistic Approach**

Many participants talked about the need for a holistic approach that recognizes the physical, psychological, social and education needs of students. Some specifically mentioned the need to take mental health into consideration as a component of a child's overall wellbeing. They said we should focus on helping students to optimize ability, rather than overcome disability, by replacing the current intervention-deficit model with a strength-based model.

Figure 4: What do students with special education needs require to achieve educational success? (n=1,599)





2.2 What Our System Should Strive to Achieve

• **Children are Supported to Reach their Highest Potential**

The Special Education system in Alberta should be child-focused, not system-focused. Over half (52%) of survey respondents said that students should be supported to reach their full potential. Many parents felt that the current system does not strive to get the best out of individual children and that many are driven to mediocrity by the system's focus on a child's learning deficits rather than learning assets. Another 30% said it should acknowledge the different needs of students with special education needs. At the same time, we need to broaden our definition of success, recognizing that high school completion and/or self-sufficiency may not be possible for all students.

• **Acknowledging Different Needs of Students**

Many of the survey respondents (30%) and numerous participants at the community consultations expressed concern about the sometimes "cookie-cutter" approach that the system uses when supporting special needs children. Parents, in particular, spoke of the need for the new system to look at children as individuals each possessing unique skills and strengths and to avoid the proclivity to cluster children into single categories with singular approaches to learning.

• **Equity and Equal Opportunities**

There should be equity in our education system. All students should have fair and equal opportunities to achieve their potential (16% of survey respondents). That means providing universal access to consistent curriculum-based programs for all students (2% of survey respondents), while at the same time providing access to programs that meet individual needs, such as vocational and life skills training.

• **Meaningful Inclusion**

Our Special Education system needs to balance the ideal of inclusiveness with the need for differentiated programming and supports (12% of survey respondents). The needs of all students must be balanced with those of students with Special Education needs. We should strive for meaningful inclusion, where children with Special Education needs participate in regular classrooms and have the supports they need to be successful. This can be achieved, in part, when we build a society that respects diversity and has moved beyond a "charity model" in how it treats people with special needs (7% of survey respondents).

• **Skilled and Committed Teachers and Support Staff**

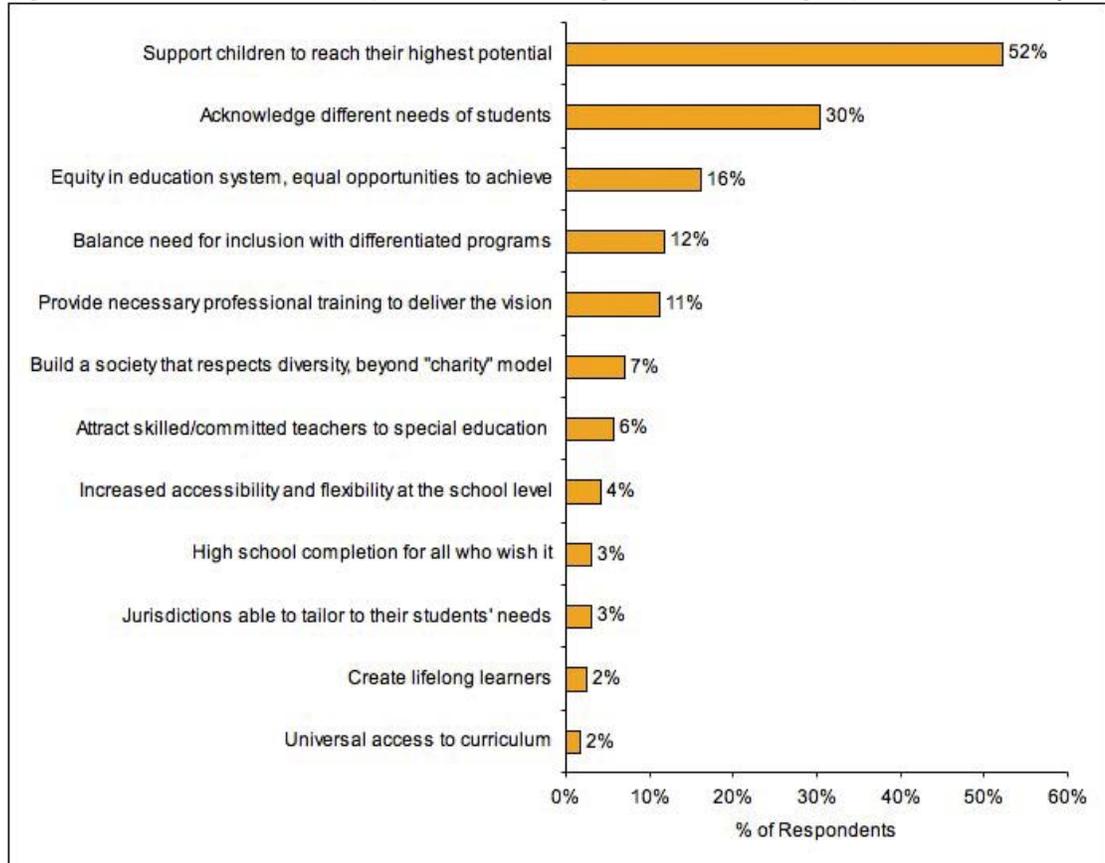
In order to attract and retain competent professionals, our Special Education system must provide adequate recognition to teachers and others – both in Special Education and mainstream – who work with students with Special Education needs. There was specific reference to improved compensation for teacher assistants. We need to provide adequate resources, sufficient pre-service training and ongoing professional development for teachers and other Special Education professionals.

• **Collaboration**

The Special Education system should be a partnership between parents, teachers, administrators and the Government of Alberta, working together to help students achieve their potential. Attention needs to also be given to the unique situation Aboriginal children on Reserves face in light of the differing jurisdictional responsibilities.



Figure 5: What should we – as a province – be striving to achieve through Special Education? (n=



2.3 One System for All

The issue of isolation and the system's differentiation of students was an element of the conversation in the community consultation. Online, people talked about their frustration with a system that reinforced differences rather than similarities and as a result isolated students with special education needs. As an example, 45 per cent (Figure 4) of respondents to the survey felt that what students with special education needs needed most was a welcoming and inclusive environment where they were accepted by their peers. Comments in the survey indicated that the use of identifiers—be it codes, categories or even exclusionary language reinforce differences and segregate students with special education needs. When asked online what Alberta's Special Education system should be, respondents frequently described their ideal as being label and barrier free, one that was student centered, personalized and inclusive.

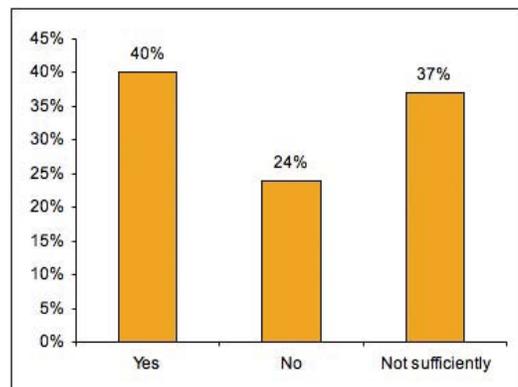
Administrators, parents and teachers repeatedly raised the issue of continuing to view students with special education needs as a separate entity. Participants across Alberta challenged the existence of a "special" education system at all and many, many participants said its continued presence as a separate entity within Alberta Education reinforced a segregationist approach to supporting students with special education needs. In fact at many of the card exercises used at the community consultations, people frequently put an "x" through the word "special" and asked that we stop viewing special education as a distinctive element. They called upon Alberta Education to create a single education system that made room for the distinctive needs of all students without singling out a specific group.



3. Mission

“The Ministry of Education, through its leadership, partnerships and work with the public – including stakeholders – inspires, motivates and provides the necessary tools and opportunities for every child to attain the knowledge, skills and attributes required for lifelong learning, self-sufficiency, work and citizenship.”

Figure 6: Do you believe that this mission serves students with special education needs? (n=1,592)



Survey respondents were presented with Alberta Education’s Mission (see above) and asked to comment on whether or not the current mission serves students with special needs. As shown in Figure 6, 40% said “yes,” 24% said “no” and the remainder (37%) said “not sufficiently.” Those who answered “not sufficiently” said the mission is not clearly demonstrated by or evident in the actions of the Ministry. This response reflects a concern not with the Mission, per se, but rather with the current “lived experience” of the Mission. Therefore, we can say that most respondents believe that the current Mission of

Alberta Education – as it is written – serves the needs of Special Education students in Alberta. They just may not feel that the province is currently living up to the ideals expressed in the Mission. In other words, the problem is not with the Mission but with the action that currently flows from this Mission. A new framework for Special Education in Alberta can be built to better support and guide the province, schools and authorities in carrying out this Mission.

4. Principles

Principles express deeply held beliefs that guide goal setting and action. In both the consultation sessions and public survey, participants were invited to explore their own underlying beliefs and to identify those that should underpin the design and function of Alberta’s Special Education system. Again, there was a high degree of consistency across participant groups and consultation methods. Participants identified both the key concepts and fundamental ideas that resonated for them. Major themes are summarized below, in sections 4.1 and 4.2.

4.1 Key Concepts

Survey respondents were asked to identify specific words that come to mind when they think about the ideal Special Education system in Alberta. As shown in Figure 7 (p. 16), these words echo many of the ideas that have already been expressed in this document. Four word groups stood out as key concepts for respondents. These included:

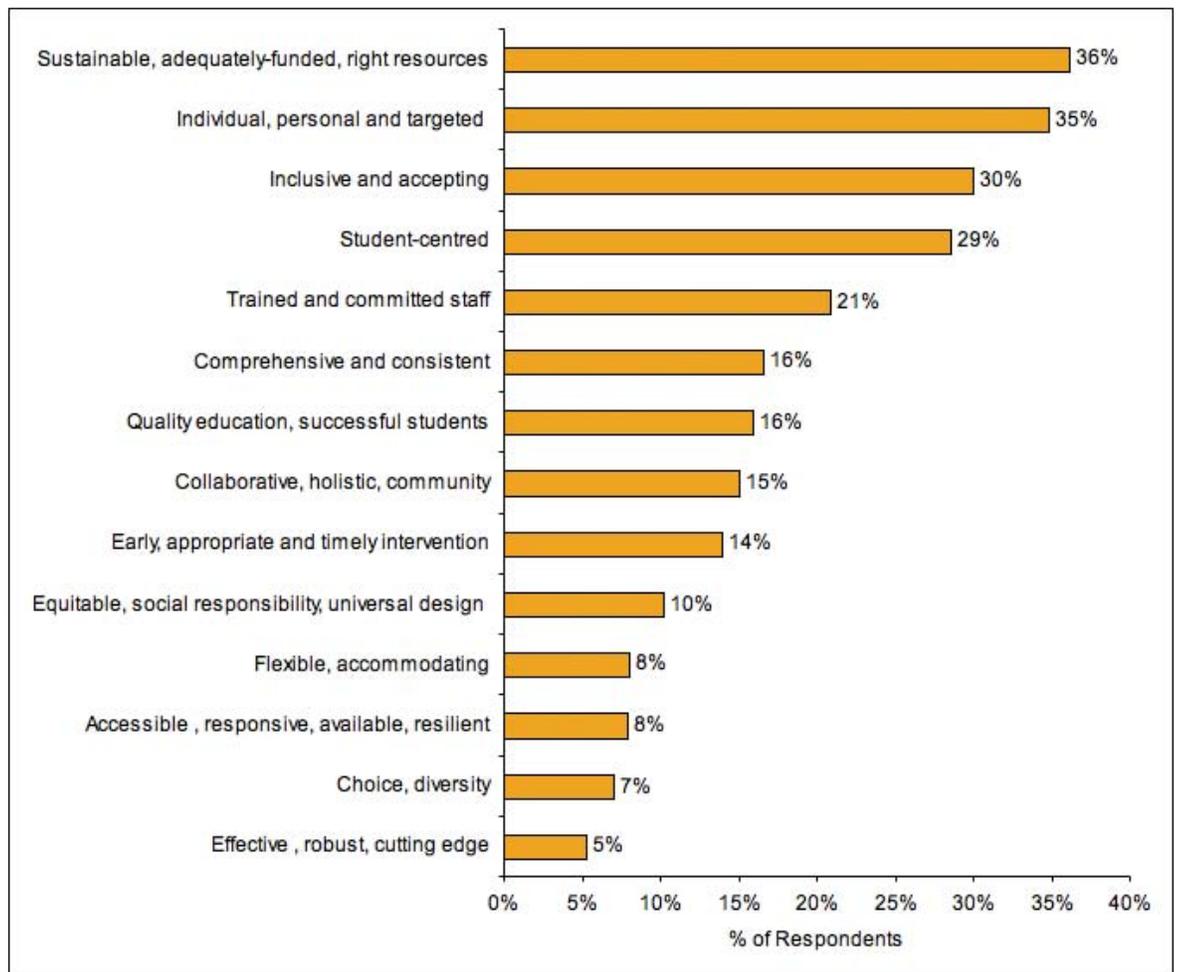
- Sustainable, adequately-funded, right resources (36%)
- Individual, personal and targeted to achieve potential (35%)
- Inclusive and accepting (30%)
- Student-centred (29%)



Other key words or ideas included:

- Trained and committed staff (21%)
- Comprehensive and consistent (16%)
- Quality education, successful students (16%)
- Collaborative, holistic, community (15%)
- Early, appropriate and timely intervention (14%)
- Equitable, social responsibility, universal (10%)
- Flexible, accommodating (8%)
- Accessible, responsive, available, resilient (8%)
- Choices, diversity (7%)
- Effective, robust, cutting edge (5%)

Figure 7: What words come to mind when you think about the ideal special education system for Alberta? (n=1,438)



4.2 Fundamental Ideas

Most of the fundamental ideas identified by survey respondents and consultation session participants can be categorized in one of two ways: 1) what the Special Education system should “do” and 2) what the Special Education system should “be.” A third category is defined by the idea of “rights,” which was raised in most consultation sessions and was explicitly mentioned by at least 18% of survey respondents. These fundamental ideas are summarized below.



• **What the Special Education System Should “Do”**

The Special Education system in Alberta should:

- Emphasize respect, equity and dignity.
- Be held accountable to its duty to meet the needs of its students.
- Focus on accommodating individual needs by providing adequate personalized, individual supports and measures for success.
- Provide consistent, universally available programs and supports to all students.
- Provide abundant supports to ensure students have the best environment possible.
- Build instructional capacity and encourage professionals to take ownership of the program.
- Take a team approach through inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary practice and responsibility.
- Work in conjunction with the parents of its students to make collaborative decisions on each child’s educational journey.
- Address needs as they emerge, rather than as dictated by accountability measures.
- Support and facilitate the efforts of student advocates, particularly parents.
- Encourage students to feel successful and competent, and to look forward to their future.

• **What the Special Education System Should “Be”**

The Special Education system in Alberta should be:

- Student centred, committed to the purposeful development of each individual.
- Evidence and research driven.
- Holistic, focused on the development of the whole child.
- Collaborative and cross-departmental.
- Universally accessible.
- Inclusive and welcoming.
- Label-free and barrier-free.

• **The Principle of Human/Constitutional Rights**

Many participants suggested principles that focused on human, individual or constitutional rights, for example:

- Every child has the right to an education.
- All children have the right to an educational experience that provides them with the opportunity to achieve their unique individual potential.
- Every child has the right to the specific individual programming and supports necessary for success.
- All children have the right to be valued and welcomed within their school community.
- All children have the right to succeed.
- All children have a right to be present and involved in the classroom.
- Every child has the right to inclusion and equality.

Although only a minority of consultation participants specifically mentioned the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the values espoused by the Convention and the rights-based language it uses correlate closely with the overall theme of rights raised in the consultation (See Appendix C United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). Many participants said they would like to see the Special Education system reflect these fundamental rights.

Concluding Remarks

Special Education stakeholders throughout Alberta share many of the same views. Many feel anxiety about the system, and parents particularly are worried about their children and the future that awaits them. Parents see the Special Education system as an opportunity for their children to access the resources that will give them a better chance for success in a world that does not always understand them. Often parents are disappointed and frustrated with the system, because they see their children's opportunity for education slipping away when the system fails to meet their individual needs. The most passionate pleas for change came from parents whose experiences with navigating Alberta's Special Education world was often challenging at best.

A clear theme that emerged from the consultation is the belief that the system should be built around the child, with the individual needs of each child determining the programming and supports that they receive. People are frustrated by the current system of coding that results in programming based on the code rather than on the child's individual needs. They want to see ongoing individual programs tailored to the unique needs and talents of each child.

Along with this, there is a strong desire for fairness and dignity, evidenced by the focus on rights as a key principle for education, in general, and Special Education, in particular. People feel that all children have the right to an education, and the right to access the people and tools needed to provide that education. For children with Special Education needs, this right can mean a larger-than-average cost on the education system – as they often need more individual attention than other students – but this should not deny their right to an education. As one participant explained, “fair isn't always equal.”

One word we heard repeated over and over in the consultation was “potential.” Everyone understands that not all children will emerge from the education system with the same experiences and knowledge, but many people feel that every child should be given the opportunity to achieve his or her potential, whatever that may be. This notion underpins the concepts of “right to an education” and “system built around the student.” As every child has the right to an education, the system must then organize itself around the individual needs of each child in order to give all children the chance to reach their potential. A commonly held belief among consultation participants was that this can be done with an increase in funding to the Special Education system, a decrease in the emphasis on labeling and coding and a renewed focus on the needs and abilities of each individual child.

The Albertans we heard from are ready and anxious to set a new direction for Special Education in Alberta. Although many (but not all) recognize that there are real limitations on our ability to deliver an “ideal” system, this project has given people a reason to hope that we may be on the right track. They valued the opportunity to be heard and want to be included as the province moves toward a new framework for Special Education.

A Vision for Special Education

The purpose of the Phase 1 consultation was to:

1. Gather input and measure the strength of Albertans' ideas, expectations and assumptions about Special Education in Alberta and
2. Capture Albertans' contribution in the development of a Vision and associated Principles for Special Education in Alberta.

All of the information gathered in the Phase 1 consultation will serve to inform the development of Vision and Principles for a new Special Education construct in Alberta. The information contained in this summary will guide the work of the Steering Committee and the Stakeholder Working Group as they move forward together with the development of a new policy, accountability and funding framework in Phase 2 of the consultation with Albertans scheduled for February and March of 2009.

Appendix A - Discussion Guide Questions

Special Education in Alberta – What do we need to look at?

Alberta Education has identified a number of themes related to special education. These themes emerge from outside Alberta Education – through research, letters, discussions, and special education symposia and conferences – and from Alberta Education’s own reviews. Recent efforts have included:

- Shaping the Future for Students with Special Needs: A Review of Special Education in Alberta (2000)
- Every Child Learns. Every Child Succeeds – The Report of the Alberta Commission on Learning (2003)
- Special Education Programming Standards Reviews
- Severe Disabilities Profile Funding Review

Listed below are some of the concerns that have come forward. They are grouped into three broad categories - policy, accountability and funding.

1. Policy

- Consistency in policies, requirements and reporting structures for special education.
- Clarification of terms (special needs, special education, inclusion, integration and disabilities) and a clear definition of what we mean by special education needs.
- Appropriateness of labels and categories for identifying students.
- Appropriateness of the outcomes of the Alberta Programs of Study for students with special education needs.
- Differing interpretations of what is meant by an inclusive model of schooling.
- Inconsistency within the delivery of special education programming across the province.

2. Accountability

- Rigorous requirements for identification documentation may affect programming.
- Appropriateness for special education students of our overall markers of success.
- Challenges of interagency collaboration to deliver services.

3. Funding

- Adequacy of special education funding.
- Supports for special education programming.
- Availability of resources across the province.

We Want to Hear from You!

What do you think is important to include in a vision for special education in Alberta and a framework for new special education policy? Your input is important to us! Please answer the following questions and return your completed questionnaire by December 31, 2008.

A third party will review all the responses and group them so we can see how some ideas fit together and others stand apart. All questionnaire data will be managed in accordance with the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

In addition, you may want to participate in one of the Phase 1 Consultation Sessions:

Phase I Consultation Schedule November/ December 2008

Date	Community/ Region	Venue	Address	Times
November 12	Red Deer	Red Deer Lodge	4311-49 Avenue	1:30 to 4:30 pm or 6:30 to 9:30 pm
November 18	Fort McMurray	Quality Inn & Conference Centre	424 Gregoire Drive	1:30 to 4:30 pm
November 20	Grande Prairie	Quality Hotel & Conference Centre	11201-100 Avenue	1:30 to 4:30 pm
November 25	Hinton	Hinton Friendship Centre	965 Switzer Drive	1:30 to 4:30 pm
November 26	Edmonton	Ramada Hotel and Conference Centre	11834 Kingsway Avenue	1:30 to 4:30 pm or 6:30 to 9:30 pm
December 2	High Level	Executive House Suites Hotel	9815 - 101 Street	1:30 to 4:30 pm
December 3	St. Paul	St. Paul Regional High School	4901 - 47 Street	1:30 to 4:30 pm
December 8	Lethbridge	Exhibition Park	3401 Parkside Drive S.	1:30 to 4:30 pm
December 11	Calgary	Radisson Hotel	2120 16th Avenue N.E.	1:30 to 4:30 pm or 6:30 to 9:30 pm
December 12	Medicine Hat	Medicine Hat Lodge	1051 Ross Glen Drive S.E	1:30 to 4:30 pm

Big Picture

1. Do you think that we have an effective approach to special education in Alberta?

Yes No

2. How important do you think the following factors are in creating a successful framework for a new special education policy?

Please check your responses.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Effective teaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive programming for students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prompt and accurate assessment of students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provision of support services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Categorizing of students using current coding criteria	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comprehensive data collection and data sharing in special education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Classroom environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Funding distribution	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Schools that are welcoming and practise inclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meaningful monitoring of success in classrooms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other factors (please specify)

3. What do you think is the greatest challenge to making changes or setting a new direction for special education in Alberta?

Vision

A vision is a picture of an ideal future that sets direction, inspires creativity and provides opportunities for all students. It should describe how the future will be different than today.

4. What do students with special education needs require to achieve educational success?

5. What should we – as a province – be striving to achieve through special education?

6. Alberta Education’s Mission states that: “The Ministry of Education, through its leadership, partnerships and work with the public – including stakeholders – inspires, motivates and provides the necessary tools and opportunities for every child to attain the knowledge, skills and attributes required for lifelong learning, self-sufficiency, work and citizenship.” Do you believe that this mission serves students with special education needs?

- Yes No
 Not sufficiently (please explain below)

Guiding Principles

Guiding principles are deeply held beliefs that guide goal setting and action. While goals change over time, guiding principles stay the same.

7. What words come to mind when you think about the ideal special education system for Alberta?

8. What fundamental ideas need to guide special education in Alberta?

9. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

To help us understand and categorize your responses, please answer the following questions.

10. Where do you live? Please check one.

- City
- Town or village
- Municipal district or county
- Other (please specify) _____

11. Please provide the first three characters of your postal code (example T5K).

12. Are you answering this questionnaire as a:

- Parent
- Parent of student with special education needs
- Student
- Teacher or school administrator
- Representative of a school authority
- Representative of government
- Representative of a service provider
- Group who has had a discussion
- Other (please specify) _____

THANK YOU for your input!

Appendix B - Consultation Session Format

Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta

Participant Agenda

1:30 PM Welcome!

- Introduction to “Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta”.
 - Move to Small Groups for Facilitated Discussions
Facilitators provided by Alberta Culture & Community Spirit and Calder Bateman.
-

2:00 PM Environmental Scan

Current environment and outside influences can have an impact on creating effective strategies for change. Environmental scanning is the gathering of information, from diverse viewpoints, about the present. Information gathered through this dialogue can improve the overall understanding of current issues and challenges, and is helpful in planning and decision-making processes.

FOCUS QUESTIONS (Environmental Scan):

- What do you think are the most important issues to address in creating a framework for new special education policy?
 - What do you think is the greatest challenge to making changes or setting a new direction for special education in Alberta?
-

2:25 PM Vision

A vision is a picture of an ideal future that sets direction and inspires creativity. It should describe how the future will be different than today.

FOCUS QUESTIONS (Vision):

- What do students with special education needs require to achieve education success?
 - What should we – as a province – be striving to achieve through special education?
-

3:25 PM Principles

Guiding principles are deeply held beliefs that guide goal setting and action. While goals change over time, guiding principles stay the same.

FOCUS QUESTIONS (Principles):

- What words or ideas come to mind when you think about the ideal special education system in Alberta?
 - What fundamental beliefs need to guide special education in Alberta?
-

4:15 PM Large Group Plenary

- Report backs from small groups
 - Next Steps
 - Closing Remarks
-

4:30 PM Adjourn

Appendix C - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Although it wasn't frequently mentioned, a small number of discussions touched specifically on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which Canada is a signatory. Adopted by resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on November 20 1989, Canada ratified the Convention on December 13 1991. Articles 23 and 28 of that document read in part:

Article 23

1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions, which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.
2. States Parties recognize the right of the disabled child to special care and shall encourage and ensure the extension, subject to available resources, to the eligible child and those responsible for his or her care, of assistance for which application is made and which is appropriate to the child's condition and to the circumstances of the parents or others caring for the child.
3. Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance extended in accordance with paragraph 2 of the present article shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, taking into account the financial resources of the parents or others caring for the child, and shall be designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development.

Article 28

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:
 - (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
 - (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
 - (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;
 - (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;
 - (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. (Emphasis added)

¹From the website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm#art23>

