



# Inclusive Education: The Role of School Psychologists

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## WHAT IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION?

Alberta Education is adopting an Inclusive Education model. **An Inclusive Educational system is one where all students belong and are given equal opportunity to learn, no matter what their differences.** This does not mean that all students will be placed in the regular classroom all the time, but it **does** mean that their educational needs must be met no matter where they are placed. In order to bring this about, classroom teachers will require supports from a variety of educational professionals. In the past, this has included reading specialists, school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, school counsellors and family school liaison workers.

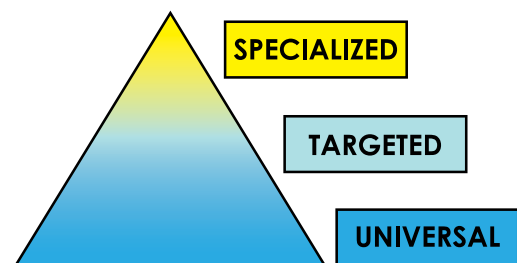
Alberta Education recently announced the Inclusive Education funding framework, which replaces previously identified special education dollars. Within this new funding model, and for the first time, Alberta Education has put forth **suggested** funding allocation guidelines that identify specific support services/professionals (e.g. speech and language, physical therapy, learning coaches). It is concerning that school psychology services was not identified as school psychologists have been an integral support service provider to special education for many years. Considering all these changes, it is important that parents (and the public) are aware of the implications of the new Inclusive Education model and the services that could be offered by school psychologists.

## HOW WILL INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AFFECT STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES AND/OR ADHD?

In the past, students with unique learning needs were required to meet Alberta Education Special Education coding criteria in order to access services through an IPP. In order to qualify for a code, most students were

first assessed by a school psychologist and/or physician. When these professionals were in short supply, often students had to wait for an assessment before they could receive support. **In some cases, school staff and parents have allowed a child's academics to fall far enough behind until their learning profile indicated a deficit in order to access the learning supports they needed. That was a problem.**

The Inclusive Education model offers three service levels to students based on a service-delivery pyramid. This type of intervention model has been identified as a recommended intervention framework by the National Association of School Psychologists (2006).



At the bottom of the pyramid are **Universal** supports, these are services that are available to all students (e.g. evidence-based teaching practices and school-wide programs). In the middle of the pyramid are **Targeted** supports, which are intended for small groups of students who are struggling with a specific skill (e.g. small-group reading intervention). At the top of the pyramid are **Specialized** supports, which are designed for individual students with more unique or intensive needs (e.g., individualized programming, comprehensive psycho-educational assessment to understand a student's unique profile of strengths/needs and then determine how to assist the student). The new model attempts to provide the right supports



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and strategies in a timely manner to help students effectively engage in continuous learning. **All students should receive a program that reflects their unique needs. On paper, it looks great!**

#### **WHO ARE THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS AND HOW CAN THEY HELP?**

School psychologists are educational specialists who are often trained in Faculties of Education. These professionals have expertise in both mental health and education. For many years in Alberta, the work of many school psychologists was limited to assessment with the goal of identifying students with a diagnosis.

However, school psychologists have a broad array of skills beyond assessment that can benefit students who are having difficulties. In some instances in Alberta, school psychologists have been able to provide a variety of services such as learning strategy suggestions, program development, implementation support and problem-solving consultation to teachers, parents, and school staff. The new Inclusive Education model opens the door for school psychologists throughout the province to offer their expertise for the benefit of students. There are several key areas where school psychologists can help:

#### **Consultation – Support others to help students**

- Help parents and school staff understand how children develop and learn

- Work with parents so they can assist their children at home and school
- Problem-solve with school teams to eliminate barriers so students can engage in learning
- Collaborate with teachers to identify problems and implement solutions
- Identify for school staff effective instruction and behaviour management strategies that will facilitate successful student learning

#### **Prevention – Take steps to prevent problems**

- Help school staff to identify early academic skill deficits so they can respond early
- Design and deliver prevention programs for at-risk children (e.g., self-esteem, home-school communication)
- Help to create safe, healthy and supportive learning environments (tolerance and appreciation of diversity)

#### **Intervention – Deliver direct services**

- Work directly with children, teachers, administrators and families
- Develop individual and classroom learning interventions
- Deliver academic and behavioural interventions
- Deliver school-based counselling, social skills and mental health services
- Coordinate with community resources to provide students with complete, seamless services
- Design and implement crisis response plans

#### **Education – Educate parents and teachers about:**

- Teaching strategies and interventions
- Parenting and discipline methods
- Classroom and behaviour management techniques
- Understanding students with exceptionalities
- Strategies to address risky behaviors, mental illnesses or substance abuse

**Advocacy – School psychologists are dedicated to advocacy, including:**

- Appropriate educational programs and placements
- Funding for adequate resources
- Education reform
- Community services and programs

**WHERE TO FROM HERE...**

“My child has been diagnosed with a disability. How can I be assured that he will receive the supports and services he needs in an Inclusive Education model?”

In the past, parents of students with learning disabilities and/or ADHD had to advocate for their children to ensure that they received the educational programming that they needed. In Alberta, with the redefinition of funding (from special education to Inclusive Education funding), school boards will have an opportunity to provide services to students in a different and, hopefully,

more proactive and responsive way. This may mean changes to the programs and services that your child receives, both positive and negative.

In summary, do not assume that your child’s unique needs will be understood or met. In the Inclusive Education model, parents are key members of the learning team. It will be important for you to be seen and heard. Ask questions. Advocate. Remember the old adage, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Continue to advocate for your child with classroom teachers, school principals and other school staff. Work with your child’s learning team to ensure that your child receives the education and support services they need to be successful learners.

**References:**

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