Building Partnerships for the Future:

Engaging Parents of Students with Special Needs

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), in partnership with the Ontario Ministry of Education, supports the belief that positive parent involvement leads to student success. Actively engaging parents of students with special needs increases opportunities to plan effectively for the student, creates successful pathways for academic success, and builds upon the community links and partnerships necessary for that child and his or her family.

Setting the stage for parent engagement begins when the child enters school. Building a trusting relationship between the home and the school is cultivated and reinforced at every juncture and transition in the child’s school career.

The key elements listed in the framework – Student Achievement, Leadership, Relationships and Communication, School System Climate and The Whole Child – have been chosen as areas of focus for discussion to assist in refining and fine tuning what we know about parent engagement, what we believe, and what we practise. When we embrace these key elements throughout our districts and in our schools, it is our belief that we will experience stronger and more engaging partnerships with parents and hence, observe improved educational outcomes for students with special needs.

Using this document, educational leaders are asked to consider and discuss what they know, believe, and practise in each key element of parent engagement. There may be information specific to their system or school that they might wish to add to the chart. Leaders will also reflect upon how these practices are routinely demonstrated throughout their system or within each school setting. Follow-up or subsequent discussions will allow educators to collectively contemplate system and school practices regarding parent engagement which require refinement in the context of students with special needs.
"It takes a whole village to raise a child." Community agencies, families and schools are most effective when working together to understand the achievement gap between different student populations. Teachers and parents working together to understand the achievement data and hence the needs of the learner can support and implement specific strategies at home and school that will lead to greater student success. The system and the schools provide parents with the tools and strategies to help support their child’s learning. These strategies may include suggestions for home conditions that support learning at each grade level.

Schools and system leaders ensure that all staff welcome parents to the school district and to individual schools. There are visible objects, signs, and tools to ensure this welcoming climate is created. The school system personnel meet at timelines and expectations associated with the procedures and practices established for students with special needs. The principal uses a collaborative approach that brings all stakeholders together to find the shared solutions that enhance outcomes for students with special needs.

School and system leaders model positive and proactive relationships with parents. Educators demonstrate that they honour and respect parents’ hopes and concerns for their children. Trust, respect and mutual regard are inherent in key communications prepared by the school or the district. These include vision and mission statements, codes of conduct, and school improvement plans. The school system recognizes that we exist in communities where families’ first language may not be English or French. Therefore, every effort is made to ensure that decisions and plans are shared in an inclusive manner.

In addition to formal reports, samples of student work and anecdotal reports are sent home often for review and parent comment. There is a regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communication to inform parents. Clear information about all school and system policies, programs, Special Education Guides, reforms and transitions are easily accessible for parents.

Parents are aware of and able to access the resources available to promote their child’s success. Parents have many daily responsibilities that the school team and system considers when scheduling meetings, communications and events that impact their children. The school council has a meaningful role in supporting student achievement and in creating policies and practices that support parent involvement. SEAC is a legislated committee of the board, and the role of SEAC is to enable parent associations with the mandate to provide advice to boards about their Special Education programs, services and budgets.

The system and schools sponsor parent education workshops and other courses or training for parents in areas such as child development, learning difficulties, home conditions that support learning, etc. Parents are encouraged to meet regularly with teachers to review and share information about student achievement data, work samples, and strategies/interventions for success. Teachers provide information for parents regarding the curriculum, parent workshops and local community networks that support their child’s learning. Strategies are in place to promote inclusiveness and to meet the needs of students from diverse communities.
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See this document in a live matrix online at http://www.ontariodirectors.ca/parentengagement. You can access additional resources, links to videos and dive deeper into what each element of the matrix means.