



Journey THROUGH School

MAKING THE MOST OF THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Students with special needs

Under Alberta's *School Act*, children who are gifted and talented are considered students with special needs because they require special programming and accommodations to meet their exceptional learning needs. Funding for students who are gifted and talented is included in the per student grant that is intended for all students. It is the responsibility of each local school jurisdiction to identify and determine the special needs of students and then provide appropriate educational programming to meet those needs.

Parent roles

It is important that parents be involved and informed partners in their child's education. Being an *involved* member of your child's learning team means:

- participating in decisions that affect your child's education
- giving your written and informed consent for any specialized assessments
- knowing your child's teachers and keeping them informed about important information that could affect your child's learning
- working with school staff to develop and implement appropriate programming for your child
- receiving information on your child's learning and progress from teachers
- discussing decisions that you do not think will best serve your child's learning needs.

Being an *informed* member of your child's learning team means knowing:

- your district and school's philosophy and beliefs about programming for children who are gifted
- what enrichment and programming options are available for children who are gifted, both in the school and in the community at large
- how children are identified and selected for gifted education
- everything that you can about both your child's gifts and talents, and his or her specific learning needs.

Sources of information

Your child's teacher can be a good starting point for learning more about gifted education. Information sessions offered by school districts, as well as one-on-one meetings with classroom teachers or resource personnel, can also provide a wealth of information about gifted education and available programming options.

Other parents with children who are gifted can often provide information about strategies that have worked for their children. Professionals can sometimes link up parents with common concerns. Through various organizations, there are also parents who can informally mentor others facing similar challenges. Although not all strategies will work for all students, knowing what has worked for others may be helpful as you consider options and make decisions about your own child's education.

Questions to ask

Parents need information to assist them in making decisions about their children's programming. Here are some sample questions that might be helpful for finding out more about your child's current or potential school placement and programming.

- What is the school's mission or focus statement and accompanying goals, and how do staff and administrators reflect these goals in their daily practice?
- How do the school's goals and mission statement highlight the importance of academic disciplines—mathematics, language arts, history, science and second languages?
- How do the school's goals and mission statement highlight the importance of character, citizenship and academic achievement?
- Are there opportunities for students to advance at their own pace through the academic programs?
- How does the school honour its high achieving students?
- How does the school honour students who contribute to the betterment of the school community?
- If a high school, does the school provide Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses?
- Are there readily available textbooks that are sufficiently demanding for students with high ability?
- How does the school provide opportunities for enrichment?
- What courses are available in the arts?
- Does the school facilitate opportunities for students to take courses from other educational institutions such as local colleges or universities?
- If a child has a learning disability, what resources and services are available for assessment, diagnosis and programming?
- How does the school program encourage individual accountability?
- How does the school create and maintain a safe and caring environment that supports learning?
- How does the school provide in-service training and education to its staff? What is the professional development focus for the upcoming school year?
- How are expectations in each subject area communicated to students?
- How does the school encourage the active involvement of parents in supporting their children's academic achievement?
- In what ways are parents involved in the school?
- How does the school or district provide opportunities for parents to learn more about gifted education?
- How is the school using technology to help students learn?

Planning for programming

Students who are gifted require **differentiated instruction** to improve their opportunities to learn. Differentiated instruction includes the thoughtful manipulation of four key learning elements, including content, process, product and environment. These four elements are interrelated and affect one another.

Content—what children are learning

All students in Alberta follow a standard curriculum. To become familiar with what your child is learning in school, see the *Curriculum Handbooks for Parents* available for each grade level. They can be purchased from the Learning Resources Centre or downloaded at no charge from the Alberta Learning Web site at www.learning.gov.ab.ca/parents/handbooks/.

Children who demonstrate that they already know some content, or can learn required content in much less time than their classmates, will benefit from content differentiation. There are a number of ways content can be differentiated. For example, children can use more advanced texts and resource materials that go beyond the specific learner outcomes in the curriculum and introduce new concepts or explore the topic in more depth and breadth.

Process—how children are learning

The *process* is how children make sense of concepts, generalizations and learner outcomes. It is how the teacher adapts the instructional strategy and what type of learning strategies the children use. Differentiated process focuses on such things as higher order thinking skills, open-ended and problem-solving tasks and learning at more complex levels. Process can be differentiated in a variety of ways, including creating opportunities for meaningful research. Curriculum compacting, questioning techniques, independent projects, and acceleration are all effective strategies for differentiating process.

- *Curriculum compacting*: This strategy either eliminates learning activities for skills and information that has been previously mastered or streamlines work to match the student's ability. The advantage of this strategy is that students can use the class time freed up by compacting to pursue enrichment activities that align with their individual learning needs and interests.

- *Questioning techniques*: Questions that draw on advanced levels of information require leaps of understanding and challenge students' thinking. Open-ended questions invite critical and creative thinking, and nurture the development of students' capacities to frame their own questions.
- *Independent projects*: Independent projects let students identify issues or topics of interest, plan an investigation and synthesize the findings. Projects offer enrichment and meaningful study for students who can demonstrate mastery with required work.
- *Acceleration*: Acceleration means permitting students to master content material at a faster pace. This can be achieved in a variety of ways such as identifying appropriate starting points based on pretesting, streamlining the regular curriculum to eliminate repetition of previously learned materials, and taking advanced subject matter courses.

Product—what children are doing

The *products* of learning are the ways in which students explore and demonstrate their understanding of content and process. Students who are gifted often need to produce what Dr. Joseph Renzulli calls "real-life products" for real audiences. These go beyond the typical research paper or report to alternatives that develop individual students' talents and curiosities and can be shared and used by others.

For example, conventional writing assignments may not be the best way for some students to show their learning. Often their brains think quicker than their hands can write. An action product, such as a PowerPoint slide show or a performance, can be a better learning experience.

Environment—where children are learning

The *environment* refers to the actual physical and social setting where learning takes place, as well as the conditions under which a child is working. The learning environment can be differentiated by changing the actual place where students work, altering the teacher's expectations, allowing flexible time limits, providing opportunities for in-depth research and giving students opportunities to work with mentors.

For some students, this enrichment can be provided in a regular classroom. To do this effectively, teachers need to offer content that is broader in concept, deeper in understanding and relevant to the student's needs and abilities. Independent study projects are often used because they can allow students to explore content areas in more depth. Enrichment replaces or extends the regular curriculum with activities that foster higher level thinking skills and problem solving. Enrichment may mean taking field trips, doing special projects or working with mentors or professionals in areas of interest.

Some children who are gifted receive individualized programming in the regular classroom in such a way that it addresses their learning needs without drawing undue attention to differences. Many instructional strategies and learning activities used with students who are gifted are effective to use with all students. For example, activities such as debates, which involve students in creative and challenging learning, may be connected directly to curriculum outcomes in a variety of subjects.

Other learning settings could include the following. All settings may not be available in all districts. Some children will benefit from programming that uses a combination of one or more of these approaches.

- *Cluster grouping*: small groups of students receive advanced instruction in reading, mathematics and other content, or work on alternate assignments.
- *Pull-out classes*: separate classes focused on special areas of emphasis for students with similar interests or abilities.
- *Out-of-grade placement*: students are placed with a higher grade for certain subjects such as language arts, mathematics and/or science.
- *Online or distance education courses*: students can access electronic classrooms via the computer, using e-mail, conferencing and direct linkage with teachers.
- *Seminars and special projects*: projects may include interdisciplinary studies and special interest groups.
- *Mentorships/Apprenticeships*: students work with a resource teacher, media specialist, parent volunteer or community member to work on a project, develop skills in a specific field and build career awareness.
- *International Baccalaureate (IB)*: provides academic programs that are internationally developed and recognized for academic rigour.
- *Advanced Placement courses (AP)*: senior high school courses that follow the prescribed AP program and allow students to earn college/university credit through testing.
- *Full-time classes or schooling-within-schools*: students receive instruction full-time in special classes for students who are gifted, housed in local schools or district sites.
- *Schools for the gifted*: serving students from several local schools, or a charter or private school dedicated to the gifted.
- *College courses/dual enrollment*: students take higher-level courses at a college or university while attending high school.
- *Home schooling*: parents serve as teachers and children learn at home.

Individualized Program Planning

Each student identified as having special needs must have an individualized program plan (IPP). This includes students who are identified as gifted and talented according to Alberta Learning criteria. Identified gifted and talented students receive a special education code for districts to use when reporting to Alberta Learning.

Generally, students registered in alternative arts or athletics programs, or academic programs, such as the International Baccalaureate Program, are not coded as gifted and talented unless they meet Alberta Learning's and the school district's specific criteria. If a child does not receive a special education code, it is not mandatory to develop an IPP for that child. However, some school districts may choose to develop an IPP for a student who does not receive a code, if programming for that student is significantly different from other students in the classroom.

An IPP is a written commitment of intent by the learning team to ensure appropriate planning for students with special needs. An IPP is:

- a collaborative team effort involving the student, parents, teachers and resource personnel—the individuals involved may change over time, depending on the needs of the student
- developed to address the specific educational needs of individual learners
- a planning document that helps monitor and evaluate a student's education programming and progress
- a process and document that evolves over time.

Programming for students with special needs builds on the provincial curriculum—the knowledge, skills and attitudes that a student is expected to learn in a subject area. However, the content may need to be modified or the learning activities and instruction adjusted to meet an individual student's ability level and exceptional learning needs.

Developing an IPP involves six interrelated stages:

1. Identifying needs
2. Setting the direction
3. Creating a plan
4. Implementing the IPP
5. Reviewing and revising
6. Transition planning.

These steps may occur in different sequences or be worked on simultaneously depending on the individual needs of students. As parents and members of the learning team, you can be actively involved in all stages of the IPP process.

Step 1: Identifying needs

You are a source of valuable information in the initial stages of developing and setting the direction of the IPP.

You can provide information about your child in areas such as the following:

- personality traits
- strengths and needs
- family and educational history that impacts the child's present learning situation
- interests, talents and desires
- aspirations and goals for your child
- assistance that your family can provide at home to reinforce and extend skills and concepts
- information about community involvement, such as music lessons, that could support and enrich your child's learning.

Alberta Learning requires that the following essential information be included in the IPP:

- assessment data
- current level of performance and achievement
- identification of strengths and areas of need
- measurable goals and objectives
- procedures for evaluating student progress
- identification of coordinated support services required, including health-related services
- relevant medical information
- required classroom accommodations, such as changes to instructional strategies, assessment procedures, materials, resources, facilities or equipment

- transition plans
- formal review of progress at regularly scheduled reporting periods
- year-end summary.

Step 2: Setting the direction

Establishing priorities helps the learning team focus on what is critical for your child to learn this school year. The team establishes these priorities based on all the information that has been gathered to date and the availability of resources.

To determine the most important learning goals, the team considers:

- priority areas to focus on
- possibilities for using this new skill or knowledge in other areas and settings
- related areas of strength
- how this need affects overall learning and achievement
- transferability to other subject areas
- how the skills and knowledge relate to your child's future career goals.

Step 3: Creating a plan

As part of the IPP team, you can offer ideas and information in the creation of long-term goals for your child. These goals are usually what the child might accomplish in a specific area in a determined period of time, usually one school year. It is important that the team identify what is manageable for the child. This is where a parent's perspective can be especially helpful.

Long-term goals are broad statements about achievement, such as:

- complete Grade 8 math program with at least a 90 percent average by end of the first term
- engage in five formal debate activities to hone logical thinking skills, including
 - comparing
 - finding assumptions
 - interpreting evidence
- design and present a science fair project to extend and reinforce creative and critical thinking skills.

Short-term objectives are small measurable steps that will lead from the child's present performance to the long-term goal. For example, short-term objectives for the last long-term goal above could include:

- science fair project
 - proposal mutually agreed upon by student and teacher by October 1
 - develop a scoring guide to assess project by October 15
 - project ready for fair by November 30
 - project plan and final product meet "Awesome" level of scoring guide.

Understanding the long-term goals and short-term objectives of your child's program plan will help you decide how to best support your child at home.

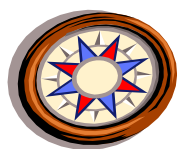
Step 4: Implementing the IPP

In this phase of the process, the learning team reviews the content of the IPP and how progress will be measured. Teachers then put the instructional and assessment strategies into practice, and adjust short-term objectives as needed. Look for ways your family can support the IPP goals at home.

Step 5: Reviewing and revising

Review meetings are opportunities to discuss your child's program and consider possible revisions. The year-end review is especially important as the team reviews the education plan and adds written recommendations to the IPP. This is particularly true for children moving from one school to another or making any kind of transition.

You can also contact the school to request a review of the IPP at any time if you have concerns about your child's progress or if your child is experiencing significant changes in achievement, attitude or behaviour. The IPP can be adjusted or changed at any time throughout the school year, as the team deems necessary.



Strategies for effective IPP meetings

Before the meeting

- Discuss the positive elements in the IPP with your child.
- Find out about your child's involvement and role in the meeting. Decide if your child will benefit from participating in part or all of the meeting.
- Review the comments from your child's last report card, and goals and objectives from the last IPP. What progress have you seen? Note any areas of concern.
- Ask your child questions such as the following.
 - What do you like best about school?
 - What are some changes that would help you learn better at school?
 - What goals do you have for yourself? (If your child attends the meeting, he or she may be able to give this input directly.)
- If appropriate, gather samples of work your child has done at home.
- Be prepared. Write a list of questions and concerns that you want to discuss. Prioritize your concerns.

At the meeting

- Ask questions to ensure that you have a clear and accurate understanding of your child's progress and program.
- Ask if there are any new assessments, reports or observations.
- Ask about your child's strengths, interests, areas of growth, areas of need and friendships.
- Share your present and future goals for your child.
- Discuss any specific concerns you have about your child.
- Discuss whether or not the IPP needs to address specific social or emotional needs of your child.

- Share any home conditions that may impact on your child's performance or behaviour at school, and any recent documents or medical updates.
- Share samples of your child's work completed at home, if you think this can contribute to a better understanding of your child. Teachers usually have samples of student work to share, but if not, ask to see samples.

At the close of the meeting

- Establish mutually agreed upon goals and strategies for your child.
- Find out how you can support your child at home.
- Take notes on recommendations and timelines, such as additional programming or assessments.
- Verbally summarize your understanding and interpretation of the decisions made, actions to be taken, timelines, and roles and responsibilities of each participant.
- Give feedback to the people working with your child in areas where you noted positive effort, growth or change. People who feel valued and recognized are encouraged to continue their efforts.
- Sign the IPP to indicate your agreement with the plan. Should you disagree with the IPP and not wish to sign it, the school will document the reasons for your decision you have given and what actions are taken to resolve the issue. *For additional information on resolving differences, see page 32.*
- Ask for a copy of the IPP to refer to at home.
- Decide on the next meeting date.

After the meeting

- Give your child feedback from the meeting.
- Discuss what needs to happen in order to reach the IPP goals. Discuss what your child's role is and also how the teachers and your family will support the plan.

To review the effectiveness of your child's IPP, consider the following questions.

- Does the IPP focus on the individual needs of my child?

- How does the IPP build on my child's strengths?
- Does the IPP focus on key goals for my child?
- Does the IPP use more than one source of assessment data to determine strengths and needs?
- If there are several teachers responsible for my child's education program, are there procedures for all of them to have access to the IPP so they can use it to plan instruction, monitor progress, and contribute to evaluating and changing goals and objectives?
- Does the IPP use a number of strategies to measure and communicate my child's progress?
- Is progress on IPP goals monitored frequently? If objectives are met, are new ones set? If my child is not demonstrating progress, does the team review the program and make changes?

Step 6: Transition planning

Transition planning involves identifying the kinds of skills that need to be in place for students to be successful in future placements and settings, and developing a plan of action to ensure students acquire these skills and attitudes. It may also include specific plans for moving between education placements and programs.

Building partnerships with school staff

One of the keys to supporting your child's journey through school is establishing positive working relationships with your child's teachers and other school staff. There are a number of ways you can help to achieve this goal.

The first step in establishing effective home-school partnerships is to get to know staff early in the school year and ensure there is ongoing communication. Make an appointment with the teacher to drop by the classroom before or after school to introduce yourself. You can also do this by telephone or e-mail. If you want to talk with the teacher, call the school and find out the best

time to do this. Welcome parent-teacher conferences as important opportunities to exchange information and work together. When children observe parents and teachers working collaboratively and treating each other with respect, it sends a powerful message about the value of partnerships and cooperation.

Part of working as a team means keeping teachers informed about important information that could affect your child's learning. Sharing relevant information can have a positive effect on your child's learning experience because it allows teachers to tailor learning opportunities and deal knowledgeably with sensitive issues.

Information to share might include:

- successful learning and behaviour techniques that you are using at home
- changes in the home setting—such as a death, divorce, unemployment or loss of a pet—that might cause emotional reactions
- your child's past school experiences
- ongoing goals for your child that you are supporting at home.

Under the *Standards for Special Education*, the principal is responsible for special education programming in the school. Get to know your school principal. He or she can be a source of information and is an important member of your child's learning team.

Be part of the school community

There are many ways you can participate in your child's school community, ranging from providing input to serving on school councils to volunteering in the school. You need to decide on the degree and nature of involvement after considering your skills, interests, family needs, work commitments and other obligations.

It is important to provide your input at available opportunities. Teachers seek parental opinions, comments, feedback and suggestions in many ways. Some ways you can provide input include:

- writing comments and completing feedback sheets attached to school newsletters

- completing interest and academic inventories about your child
 - commenting on projects and accomplishments.
- Participating in parent–teacher conferences and attending school council meetings are also opportunities to provide input to the school community.

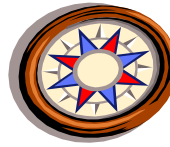
Participating in school councils or serving on school committees can be opportunities to gain knowledge about educational issues, build relationships with other parents and school staff, and work together to ensure that all children in the school are getting a quality education. School councils provide advice to the principal on school-related issues, such as policies, program priorities, budget, special needs, school climate and events planning.

Volunteering

For some parents, volunteering in their children’s school can be a hands-on way to show their children that they value education and support the work of teachers and other staff. This, in turn, can increase all children’s learning opportunities. Parent volunteers can also be powerful supporters of the school and public education, and provide valuable links to the wider community.

Volunteers can offer to:

- share expertise on a particular career, theme, skill, interest or custom
- work one-on-one with a child who is experiencing academic difficulties in a specific area such as reading
- serve as a mentor to an individual child
- complete administrative tasks at home, such as preparing materials or phoning other parents about field trips and special events
- assist in the school library
- assist in the classroom under the direction of the teacher.



Strategies for building effective partnerships with school staff

- *Know what you want to accomplish and keep your goals in mind, but remember that there are many routes to your destination.* Be prepared to be flexible and to make compromises along the way.
- *Work cooperatively.* Listen to and consider the perspectives of others. Most of the people you negotiate with have good intentions, even if their opinions may differ from yours. Concentrate on concerns, not emotions. Find areas where you agree and build on those.
- *Expect courtesy and respect from school staff.* Meaningful parent involvement is a core value of the education system in this province.
- *Be respectful of those who are working on behalf of your child.* Go out of your way to be polite and diplomatic and always keep your child’s needs in the forefront of the discussion.
- *Be patient and persistent.* Change may happen slowly; finding the information or assistance you require may be a time-consuming process of trial and error. Keep moving toward your goals step-by-step.
- *Be a good communicator.* The old adage “it’s not what you say but how you say it” is so true when working with others. Clear and regular communication among all members is key to the success of the learning team.
- *Ask for clarification if there is anything you are unsure of.* You may hear terms you are not familiar with, such as *IPPs* (individualized program plans) or *outcomes*. If at any time you are unsure about specific information, ask. To communicate effectively, everyone on the team must speak and understand the same language.

- *Enlist the support of like-minded parents, teachers, administrators and community members.* The best advocates work with others. By working in collaboration with teachers and other parents, seeking family support and accessing assistance through community agencies, you can create win-win solutions that work for everyone.
- *Recognize and cherish your accomplishments.* Celebrate the positive impact they have on your child's learning, and emotional and social life.
- *Understand that communication and collaboration take time.* You may be invited to participate in a variety of meetings over the course of the school year. These may include in-school team meetings as well as consultations with other support personnel, in addition to regular parent-teacher conferences.
- *Give change a chance.* Change takes time. Your child may require a period of adjustment to a new setting before positive change is evident. Clear, open communication among learning team members will go a long way to ensuring expectations are reasonable.

How do I know if my child's programming is the right programming?

Talking to children about experiences at school and observing their behaviour toward school are keys to ensuring that they are on the right track. If your child is excited about learning, talks openly about his or her classes, and is eager to go to school, he or she is most likely being appropriately challenged and supported.

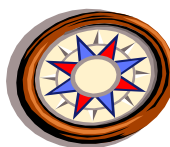
If you feel your child may not be receiving the right programming, or you have any other concerns, talk to your child's teacher. Always try to resolve issues with the people who are working with your child. This means meeting with the learning team and looking for win-win solutions.

For example, if your child is frustrated by the lack of challenge in the current learning situations, meet with his or her teachers to review the current program and discuss potential changes that could be made. If your child has mastered the skills in a particular subject and finds the work boring or repetitive, a pretest of the unit could help to determine his or her level of skill; if your child does demonstrate mastery of the learning outcomes currently under study, the teacher might consider different options such as accelerating learning or arranging for your child to use the time to do an independent study project.

If you cannot resolve the issue with your child's teacher, the next step is to request a meeting with the school principal. Let the principal know your concerns. Also let the principal know that you have discussed this issue with the teacher and have not been able to come to a satisfactory agreement. The teacher should participate in the meeting with the principal. This will ensure all partners can contribute information, perspectives and possible solutions.

Resolving differences

School boards are required to make every reasonable effort at the school and district level to resolve concerns collaboratively with parents. Despite these efforts, there may be differences of opinion between parents (or in some cases, an older student) and the school about the education of a child with special needs. When this happens, there are a number of strategies for successfully resolving these differences.



Strategies for resolving differences

- *Begin by requesting a meeting with your child's teachers.* Indicate what the topic will be. This information allows teachers to schedule an appropriate amount of time, and be better prepared to answer your questions and address particular concerns.

- *Be prepared.* Write down questions and concerns you want to address and bring this list to the meeting.
- *Focus your concerns on your child's learning needs.* Decide what is most important and focus your energy on that.
- *Consider what you would like the outcome of the meeting to be.* This will help you focus your discussion and problem solving.
- *If possible, involve your child in finding a solution.*
- *Ask questions.* Ensure you have a clear understanding of your child's progress and programming by asking as many questions as you need to.
- *Take notes, especially with respect to recommendations and timelines.* Confirm those commitments at the end of the meeting.
- *If you feel that additional information is necessary, schedule another conference at the conclusion of your meeting.*
- *If you come to an agreement that a certain change will be made, establish how you will know if this change is happening and that it is working.* Discuss the outcomes that have been agreed upon and decide when progress on these outcomes will be reviewed.
- *Give teachers and the school time to implement changes.*

District level appeals

If the issue cannot be resolved at the school level, the *Alberta School Act*, Section 123, states that school boards must have a process for appealing school district decisions that significantly affect a child's education, such as disagreements over identification of a special need or program placement. The school principal can provide information on the appeal procedure in your

district. Typically, parents and school staff prefer to work out agreements collaboratively at the school level, but in some instances the next step is an appeal at the district level.

Appeal procedures vary from district to district but all procedures should be built on the following principles.

- The appeal process should be fair, timely and open. It should ensure that parents and district staff know in advance how the appeal process works, and have reasonable opportunity to prepare and present their case.
- The process should have the flexibility to accommodate different kinds of disputes.
- Parents, or students who are 16 or older, should have the right to appeal at least one level above the level of the employee who made the decision being appealed. Whoever hears the appeal should be the person who will make the appeal decision. For example, if a principal made the original decision that is under appeal, a person in a supervisory position over the principal should hear the appeal and uphold or overturn the original decision made by the principal.
- The person who hears the appeal should not have been involved in the decision being appealed.

School boards have an obligation to inform parents of their right to appeal and must provide written copies of the district's process. The district policy should be consistent with the principles above, and should describe specifically how the process works and how long it takes. If the board itself does not hear the appeal, the policy should clearly state who will assume this responsibility.

Review by Minister

If an appeal to the school board is completed and parents disagree with the decision and feel it does not meet the learning needs of their child, they may write to the Minister of Learning and ask for a review of the board decision. School boards have an obligation to advise parents of their right

to request that the Minister review the board's decision if they are not satisfied with that decision. A student who is 16 years of age or older may also request a review. The Minister of Learning may review a board decision on some specific matters, including the special education placement for a student with special needs.

If the Minister does review the case, the review will only assess the situation for one school year, because that situation may change over time. For example, the board may not offer a program in the year of the review, but may develop an appropriate program later. A student's learning needs may also change so that the program determined to be appropriate at the review may no longer match the student's learning needs.

There are very few reviews by the Minister each year. In most cases, parents and educators prefer to resolve differences at the school and district level.