

Education 101

Education 101 is intended to describe Alberta's education system for individuals who may not be familiar with how this particular system serves young people in Alberta. Additional information can be obtained from the people who work within the education system and on the Government of Alberta website. The information contained in this document is based on the education system in 2011 and, as with all human services, may evolve as the needs of children, youth and families change over time.

What is the structure of education in Alberta?

- The *School Act* is the foundation for education in Alberta. The Alberta Programs of Study outline the learner outcomes for students in the public system.
- Education is provided through school authorities overseen by the Government of Alberta through the Ministry of Education.
- Alberta's public education system includes public, separate, francophone and charter schools that are governed by elected school boards.

Go to Alberta Education at <http://education.alberta.ca/> for more information.

Who is eligible for public education in Alberta?

- Children and youth are legally required to attend school from ages 6 to 16. School boards may set their own minimum age requirements for entering school; many allow students to enter Grade 1 if they are 6 years old by March 1 of the current school year. Some determine that the student must be 6 by September 1 or December 31 of the school year.
- Public education in Alberta is provided free of charge to students who are under 19 years of age, meet certain citizenship requirements and whose parents reside in Alberta. School authorities may provide education for students who are under 20 years of age as of September 1st.
- Kindergarten refers specifically to the education program for children, less than 6 years of age, in the year prior to Grade 1. Kindergarten is part of a broad, co-ordinated system of local and provincial programs referred to as Early Childhood Services (ECS). Parents may choose to have their child participate in an ECS program but it is not mandatory for children to attend a program prior to Grade 1.
- To find out more about available ECS programs in your area, please contact your local school authority. For more information about ECS programming, please visit <http://education.alberta.ca/parents/ecs.aspx>

What choices do parents, foster caregivers and guardians have for education in Alberta?

■ Parents, guardians and foster caregivers have a variety of choices for educating their children in Alberta. The Alberta government supports choice in education to facilitate meeting the needs of students and the community. Parents may choose to educate their children with a public, separate, Francophone or charter school authority, or with a private school, or they may choose to educate them at home, supervised by a school authority. General information for parents and caregivers is available at

<http://education.alberta.ca/parents.aspx>

■ School authorities, including charter schools, may offer a range of programs to meet the needs of their students. This may include outreach programs, on-line education, locally developed courses, alternative programs, virtual schools, specialized language, sports, arts or faith-based programs, as well as other programs that the local school board has determined will meet the needs of their students and the community.

■ Children and youth are educated based on joint decisions between families, schools and other professionals. For some students, their educational needs are met in grouped programs based on specific needs, for others it means participating in class with their age peers and having instruction within the Alberta Programs of Study. For others, it's a combination of the two experiences.

■ Private schools are another option and may charge tuition and other fees as required. Private schools may follow the Alberta Programs of Study and employ certificated teachers or they may follow a curriculum of their own choosing and may or may not hire certificated teachers. These differences are then reflected in the level of funding from and accountability to the government.

What is available for younger children?

■ Parents are a child's first and most important teacher, but other early learning opportunities may take place in a variety of settings outside the home. What young children learn at this stage will have a major impact on successful learning experiences in school, their personal development and future participation in society. School authorities, private ECS operators and community-based organizations may provide programs to give children early experiences in socialization, literacy, language development and numeracy in a play-based environment. To find out more about programs in your area, contact your local school, Child and Family Services Authority or Family and Community Support Services office.

■ Children with a disability or delay may need extra supports to be successful in preschool or kindergarten. There are choices available and parents should explore the options to choose the one that best meets the needs of their child or family. For more information on Early Childhood Services visit <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/special/ecs.aspx>

■ Children with special education needs may require additional supports, accommodations and adaptations to ECS programming. Eligibility for ECS special education programming is based on an assessment that shows the child's need for educational programming and support. This assessment may have to be completed by a psychologist, occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist or other professional. If you are concerned your child may have a disability or delay, please contact your family doctor, Alberta Health Services <http://www.healthlinkalberta.ca/default.htm> or, **1-866-408-5465**, your local school authority, or private ECS operator. For more information please see:

Early Childhood Programming for Special Needs http://education.alberta.ca/media/1176475/2010-aug_fs-elb-programmingsn.pdf

Disability/Delay Fact Sheet: Where can Parents go for help?
<http://education.alberta.ca/media/1231917/fselbdelayordisability.pdf>

What is Special Education?

■ There are many opportunities for students who have special needs. Special education refers to the education of all students and children identified with mild, moderate or severe disabilities, or as gifted and talented. It is founded on the belief that all children can learn and reach their full potential given opportunity, effective teaching and appropriate resources.

■ Alberta Education's *Setting the Direction for Special Education* initiative and the Government of Alberta's *Action on Inclusion* recognize inclusive education as essential for meeting the learning needs of all students. Inclusive educational supports may be provided in a regular classroom, a separate class with specialized supports or a combination of the two based on the needs of the child and the collaborative decisions by those involved with the student. In some cases, education is provided through alternative programs or specialized schools.

■ Quality instruction, with a focus on the unique needs of each child, rather than setting, is the key to success. Decisions related to the placement of children are best made on an individual basis, in a way that maximizes their participation in the experience of schooling. Parents of students with special education needs may have options to send their child to a designated special education private school. The Government of Alberta provides additional funding to the operators of these schools, but the operators retain the right to charge parents a tuition fee.

How do students access services?

■ Every student is the responsibility of a public or separate school board. Residency is based on geography and religion. Students are considered to be residents of the area in which their parent(s) or guardian(s) normally reside. A student can only claim one place of residency.

■ Where there is a separate school district established in the area, children with a parent of the same faith as the separate board, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, are residents of and the responsibility of that separate school board. All other children are considered residents of the local public school board.

■ Schools are required to enroll students residing within their designated attendance boundaries. Students residing within the attendance area must be accepted for enrollment in that school if there is a suitable program and have priority over students residing outside the attendance area if there are insufficient resources and facilities to accommodate both.

■ Parents may want their children to attend a school outside of their attendance area or board jurisdiction, but they may have to pay for or arrange their own transportation.

■ Some services may be more challenging to access in some areas of the province due to levels of availability of specialists and resources as well as distance from larger municipalities.

What programming and instruction is delivered in Alberta?

■ The Alberta Programs of Study, established and mandated at the provincial level, identify the outcomes for all subject-area courses and programs and apply to all students at all grade levels.

■ At the school level, planning involves decisions about how Programs of Study can best be implemented with particular groups of students and with individuals.

■ School authorities have the responsibility to provide instructional programs for students to meet the provincial high school completion requirements and prepare for entry into the workforce or post secondary studies.

■ Schools are to ensure that students understand personal and community values, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, while they develop the capacity to pursue learning throughout their lives. More information can be found at <http://education.alberta.ca/departments/policy/standards/goals.aspx>

What are the roles of students, teachers and parents?

Everyone, including parents, students, educators, the community, business and government, has an important and co-operative role to play in public education. Roles include:

■ **Students** assume responsibilities and follow the code of conduct of their school; complete their homework and assignments; contribute to a caring, respectful and safe climate in their school; and make choices about their learning and career paths.

■ **Teachers** provide instruction; foster and encourage students to achieve learning expectations; stay up-to-date on curriculum and teaching methods; evaluate and provide results to students, parents and the board; maintain discipline and a caring and safe climate in their classroom and school; and engage partnerships with students, parents, guardians and foster caregivers.

■ **Parents and Caregivers** foster a positive attitude toward learning; make sure their children come to school ready to learn; make decisions regarding their children's education, including choice of schools and programs; help their children to develop good study habits; and maintain positive and ongoing communication with teachers and the school.

How is public education funded in Alberta?

Government education funding is distributed in three categories:

1. Base Funding: A set dollar amount for every student enrolled by September 30th of the school year is provided to the school authorities. After this date, no further funds are provided.

2. Additional Funding for Differential

Factors: These funds are allocated according to the student population that a jurisdiction serves and the unique jurisdictional and environmental factors where a school board operates. Funding is provided to the school authority based on a profile of historic circumstances, such as numbers of severe special needs students and not on the actual numbers from year-to-year. The dollars are neither targeted for specific students nor for prescribed services such as teacher assistants or transportation, but instead the school authority has the responsibility to determine and address the needs of all students within available resources.

Additional student population funding allocations range from just over a \$1,000 dollars for every self-identified First Nation, Métis or Inuit student, and students who are learning the English language, to amounts ranging from a few to several thousand dollars per student, depending on the special needs

category and the district historic profile. For students with mild or moderate disabilities, school authorities must meet the needs of these students using the base funding as no additional dollars are allocated for this level of need. Currently students are “coded” in special needs categories according to Alberta Education criteria.

3. Targeted funding to address specified

outcomes: Targeted funding for provincial initiatives is allocated for specific priority programs as determined by Alberta Education.

With the exception of targeted funding, government does not specify how school boards should spend their funds. It is the responsibility of locally elected school board trustees to use their funds effectively to address local needs. In some school authorities, funds are allocated to schools where site-based decisions are made according to the school's population and priorities, and considering available resources within the school authority. Specialized services may be more difficult to access in some areas of the province or are only available during specific times.

What is Alberta Education's role with children and youth who are in the care of Alberta Children and Youth Services?

Educators can have a significant impact on improving results for young people in provincial government care by working with caseworkers, caregivers and the students themselves, to plan and implement strategies for success. Compared to the general student population, children and youth in care tend to do poorly on Provincial Achievement Tests, often fall farther behind in school, may drop out as they get older, and are less likely to graduate from high school. The Provincial Protocol Framework outlines the expectations for educators, caseworkers, caregivers and other partners working with children and youth in care in school. More information about the Framework can be found at <http://education.alberta.ca/admin/crossministry/ppf.aspx>

What information can educators share in order to support success in school for students?

- Educators are expected to report student progress and achievement to the students and their parents or guardians.
- Legislative and policy provisions affirm that school staff, caseworkers and service providers can share relevant and necessary information to collaboratively support and provide programming for students.

Are there alternatives to suspension and expulsion?

If a student is having difficulty demonstrating appropriate behaviour in school, it is important to work with the student's team to consider alternatives to suspension and expulsion. Examples may include students working at school, but removed from the other students, or having the student work in an alternate classroom or at a site that can provide special assistance. For students who need time to adjust to a new setting or home, consider the advisability of transitioning with a partial school day or practice bus rides to help the student cope with the new setting or bus route. Parameters around suspensions and expulsions are outlined in the *School Act*.

It should be noted that expulsion requires a process that is determined by the *School Act*. It only occurs after a student has been suspended, the principal has submitted a written report outlining the circumstances to the board, and the board has agreed to expel the student. Parents and guardians have a role to play in the expulsion process, including the right to make presentations to the board and the right to request a review of a decision to expel. Expulsion is not simply that the school has provided advice to the student about withdrawing from school or a school statement about not returning to school, but is the result of a formal process involving the school, the board and the student, which describes the student's rights and the board's offer of another educational program. School jurisdictions that expel students are required to provide another education program for expelled students for the balance of that school year.

What is the Attendance Board?

In most cases, truancy problems are resolved at the local school level where students, parents and school board employees can work together before there is a need to involve the provincial Attendance Board. It is worth noting that attendance at school is a shared responsibility of students, parents and schools. When a truancy problem cannot be resolved locally, school boards may refer the matter to the provincial Attendance Board.

The Attendance Board conducts a hearing into why a student is not attending school. Members of the Attendance Board are appointed by the Minister of Education and may include parents, lawyers, members of the general public, retired educators, business people and other professionals.

The Attendance Board has the same powers as the Court of Queen's Bench to summon witnesses and obtain information and records. On the hearing date, a panel of the attendance board inquires into the nature and extent of the issues or problems, services being provided, and possible options or strategies to encourage the student's regular attendance at school. The panel reviews the evidence and testimony of witnesses before deciding on the best course of action and issuing a verbal order.

Truancy is often the first visible sign of a number of problems a student may be experiencing. In many cases, there is a need for a collective and sometimes innovative approach. Although directives to the student and parents that the student must be sent to and attend school are key actions in most cases, these are not the only solutions. The panel may direct the student to an alternate education program, course or student program, or make other rulings it considers appropriate in the circumstances. For example, it may direct that the student be assessed or become involved in counselling, or could impose a monetary penalty on the parent. The matter may also be reported to the Child and Family Services Authority when the panel has a protection concern. In exceptional circumstances where a student, parent or other party fails to obey an order of the Attendance Board, the order may be filed with the Court of Queen's Bench for further action.

School Act at: http://www.qp.alberta.ca/574.cfm?page=s03.cfm&leg_type=Acts&isbncln=9780779733941

Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12 at: <http://education.alberta.ca/media/832568/guidetoed.pdf>

