Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta

Minister's Forum | What we Heard

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SETTING THE
DIRECTION
MINISTER'S FORUM

we engage
engager

Government of Alberta

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background

In the spirit of continuous improvement, the Setting the Direction initiative grew out of a profile review of severe disabilities funding in the fall of 2007. This review uncovered province-wide inconsistencies in the ways that: students with disabilities are coded, assessed and receive necessary supports and services; policy is interpreted; and students' administrative files are managed. That work provided an important snapshot of some of the obstacles to effective program management and programming for students with disabilities.

Rather than simply "fix" the problems, Alberta Education initiated a comprehensive review of the special education system in Alberta. The Minister of Education appointed a citizens' Steering Committee, chaired by MLA Naresh Bhardwaj and made up of parents, educators and special education and medical experts. The Steering Committee guided a three phase consultation process to set a new direction for special education in Alberta.

The Setting the Direction consultation process connected the Steering Committee with over six thousand Albertans – either online or in person at one of forty consultation sessions. Participants included students, parents, teachers, teacher assistants, principals, elders, school authority administrators, trustees, medical professionals and special education specialists. *(See Appendix I – Consultation Methods)*

Through a combination of consultation, research, literature review, work with experts in the field and ongoing conversations about issues, the Steering Committee developed a Framework for Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta. This Framework – including a new vision for special education, principles, policy direction, accountability measures and a funding distribution formula – was presented to over 1,000 Albertans at a Minister's Forum in June 2009.

The Minister's Forum

The Setting the Direction Minister's Forum was held June 8 and 9, 2009 at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton. It was attended by 820 Albertans and another 288 people participated through interactive webcasts at 78 sites across the province. The purpose of the forum was to present the Framework and engage a broad range of stakeholders in meaningful discussion to foster a common understanding of the Framework.

The two-day forum included plenary sessions, to establish a common foundation for participation, and breakout sessions, which offered participants an opportunity to actively review the Framework and provide advice on implementation. The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of input received from participants in the Minister's Forum.

The Forum was well-attended and well-received by the majority of participants. *(See Appendix II – Forum Participant Evaluation)*

1. Response to Setting the Direction Framework

1.1 What People Like About the Framework

Many participants in the Minister's Forum said they felt heard throughout the consultation process and were pleased to see their input and thoughts captured in the framework document. They said the Setting the Direction initiative showed that Alberta Education was committed to change and were encouraged by the promise represented by the Framework.

- **The new direction**

  In particular, participants liked the promise of a wraparound approach and inter-ministerial collaboration – which they hoped would mean better access to services by schools in all areas of the province, including those in rural areas. They also liked the emphasis on new and effective ways to share resources and information across the province, along with multi-faceted delivery and the effective use of technology. Although they were supportive of the changes, participants also said they liked that Alberta Education will be identifying best practices and keeping what is working.

- **The numerous and very positive benefits for students**

  Participants said the new direction was very student-focused and would provide significant positive benefits for students. They identified a large number of benefits, including:

  – elimination of labels and a new focus on strengths and assets (instead of deficits);

  – teaching directed at the learning needs of each student, along with measures of student achievement that account for diverse learning needs;

  – well-resourced classrooms to help all students experience success;

  – attention to early intervention, early learning, early literacy and human development;

  – creation of truly "inclusive" classrooms and recognition of the right of students to be included in regular classrooms;

  – provision of assistive technologies for all students who need them

  – recognition of the special needs of gifted students;

  – more assistance and opportunities for students identified as mild/moderate; and

  – greater flexibility, diversity and choice in education.

- **The recognition of teachers as professionals**

  Participants said the Framework clearly recognized the central role of teachers in Setting the Direction for special education. They liked the focus on building teacher capacity and investment in ongoing professional development. Many said it addressed concerns about every-increasing demands on teachers, by emphasizing smaller class sizes and less paperwork. Teachers were pleased to be viewed as a significant source for assessing student needs, strengths, abilities and achievement. They liked the proposed use of learning coaches and mentor programs, as well as proposed improvements in university education and pre-service training for teachers.

- **The importance of parental involvement in the education of their children**

  Participants said they liked the emphasis on school-parent relationships and partnerships. Parents were pleased to be recognized as members of the learning team, sharing responsibility for their children's education with teachers, administrators, Alberta Education and other professionals.

- The new approach to resources/funding/accountability

Participants said that the approach to resourcing proposed by the Framework was congruent with the vision, mission and guiding principles, which they felt were very strong and positive. They liked the change in funding from a focus on "codes" to a focus on student needs. They also said they liked the new system-based accountability.

1.2 Challenges and Concerns

Although participants were generally supportive of the Framework, they identified a number of challenges or concerns with implementing the Framework in Alberta schools.

- Achieving collaboration and stakeholder "buy in"

Participants said building relationships of trust and engagement between parents, teachers and other stakeholders will likely take time and need clear guidance and generous support. They said guidelines for collaboration will have to be clear, to ensure little in interpretation, and asked: Where will learning team members and collaborating professionals find time to meet? Participants were also concerned about the ability of different ministries to share financial resources and wondered how inter-ministry collaboration would be achieved, in practice. They said Alberta Education will need to reassure and convince parents, teachers, school administrators and boards that the new funding model will be in place and will be adequate for student needs.

- Ensuring schools and classrooms are adequately resourced

Participants said that the success of the Framework will depend, in large part, on appropriate and adequate resourcing. They said all schools will require the appropriate tools and resources prior to implementation. They also said implementation should be simultaneous throughout Alberta. They pointed out that student-teacher ratios will need to reflect the new goals and direction in education and acknowledged that current infrastructure may be challenged in meeting the needs of both students and service providers. While they were pleased with the focus on making the best use of teaching assistants, they saw challenges in establishing and implementing standards in this area. Participants also emphasized the importance of providing sufficient professional development opportunities for teachers, both to prepare for implementation and once the Framework is implemented.

- Developing and implementing generally accepted assessment tools to identify student needs

As they had throughout the consultation process, participants asked: What will replace coding? While they supported eliminating coding, they expressed anxiety about the, as yet, unknown system for identifying student needs. Participants said that assessing learning disabilities in students may be difficult without standard testing. They also asked: How will success of current mild/moderate students be monitored in light of the changed assessment and funding models? And, where will students with severe cognitive or physical disabilities fit into this inclusive system?

- Developing and implementing generally accepted measures of student success

Participants said that it will be difficult to measure and report student achievement within a flexible curriculum system. They said high-achieving students need to be recognized for their accomplishments, while students who are behind need to be identified and provided appropriate supports.

- Reflecting the perspective of First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) in the Framework

Some participants said the Framework did not adequately reflect the FNMI perspective. They asked Alberta Education to look closer at the FNMI recommendations from the consultation process and incorporate them into the next phase of Framework development. At the same time, participants said the perspective of other cultures also needs to be incorporated in the framework to ensure it fully represents Alberta's culturally diverse population.

- Meeting the needs of schools in rural areas

   Participants said rural schools and communities typically have limited access to facilities, resources and funding. They said forming wrap-around teams and having sufficient services available in rural areas will be challenging. In particular, they asked: Where will trained teachers, learning coaches and other professionals come from in rural areas? For this reason, they said rural communities need a modified approach to implementing the Framework.

- Potential impact of political change

   Participants were concerned about a possible Cabinet shuffle within the Alberta Government of Alberta, and what affect it would have on *implementing the Framework*. They felt that the education system is moving forward, and were fearful that progress being made now could be lost later.

- Funding and resource allocation

   Funding and resource allocation and distribution was unclear, participants said. They want to have a more concrete understanding of how distribution will be approached, and the affect it will have on students. They said the broad Framework did not include a detailed funding guideline, and were worried that there will not be enough resources available to implement this initiative to its full potential.

- Meeting the September 2010 time

   While most participants supported the new direction, they asked: Can this really be in place for September 2010? Will teachers be prepared? Will adequate funding and a fair funding model be in place? Will student transition plans be ready? Will parents be ready? Is the general public supportive of the changes?

2. Implementing the Programming Goals

To achieve the necessary cultural shift in Alberta's education system, the Setting the Direction Framework will focus on three priority areas: Curriculum, Capacity and Collaboration. Forum participants were asked to explore each of these priority areas and to provide their insights for implementation by answering three questions:

- What will this change mean for students?
- What will this change mean for me?
- How will I prepare for this change?

Goal 1: Curriculum

Alberta Education's definition of students' educational success encompasses achievement and progress for every student, so that each may have the opportunity to "...achieve success and fulfillment as citizens in a changing world." (Alberta Education Business Plan 2009-2012)

What change will mean for students

- Personal achievement

   Participants said if the philosophy of the Framework can be achieved in the classroom, all students will become confident and capable global citizens. They said students will be able to take greater ownership of their own learning and will have greater opportunities to learn according to their learning style. By focusing on strengths, students will develop more positive self-images and grow in self-esteem.

- New curriculum

Participants said a flexible approach to curriculum will allow teachers to manage diverse needs within the classroom. At the same time, they said every student should be learning at the same level as their peers across the province. Rather than a "modified" curriculum, some participants said the Framework will re-create curriculum, offering individualized (personalized) programming to students. However, they recognized that curriculum for all is a "wonderful dream" but remains a "long way off." Other participants were concerned about developing curriculum for "special" needs, when all students are so different and have different needs. They asked: Is a curriculum based approach always appropriate for all children? Some participants said the system should focus on life and learning skills as opposed to results-based instruction that encourages students to focus on test results.

- Student assessment

Participants called for uniform expectations, so all students experience a similar education throughout the province. Some participants said standardized provincial testing and exam-based instruction should be eliminated and replaced with exams that evaluate students' overall educational experience. They said students should be able to show what they have learned in different ways that will be regarded as equally important. At the same time, they asked: Are we being naïve? Is it realistic to assume that more students will be able to access post-secondary education? Where is post-secondary/advanced education in this conversation?

- Identifying student needs

Many participants asked the practical question: How will learning and support needs of students be identified? They said diagnoses should not be disregarded, as they can be important tools for ensuring students have what they need to succeed. Participants also asked what resources would be available to students without disabilities, including gifted students, to meet individual needs. Some participants asked: What does the Framework mean for refugee/immigrant students?

- Resources for learning

If the Framework is implemented appropriately, participants said it will mean a variety of materials and resources available in all schools to ensure that every student has the opportunity to be successful. They said students will have timely access to resources in an appropriate format to their needs, including age appropriate and adapted materials for students who are deaf, hard of hearing or blind.

What change will mean for other stakeholders

- General

Participants were hopeful that changes in the curriculum area would result in better collaboration with all parties in case conferences. They also pointed to the benefit of continuous professional development for all educators, administrators and other members of the learning team. Some participants said the elimination of coding would reduce stress for teachers and administrators about the loss of funding or the possibility of students falling through the cracks. Participants liked the idea that they would be able to access adapted materials from a common, central source.

- Parents

Parents were unsure how this change would benefit their children or themselves. Some were concerned that there would be a lack of opportunity for parental input, while others said "it will mean I need to advocate even more for my child."

- Teachers and teacher assistants

    Teachers said they are stretched to meet the needs of all students in the classroom and will need time to embrace these changes. Some said they were overwhelmed by the specialized knowledge and training that every teacher will require. Both teachers and teaching assistants said they will need increased resources and supports in the classroom. They asked: Who will develop or how ill modified curriculum be developed? They also wanted clarity on assessment, asking: Will there be less reliance on standardized tests?

- Principal/administrators

    Principals/administrators said the change would mean more collaboration with specialists. They also said they will need more and specific tools and information to help teachers adapt to the changes.

- Professionals and service providers

    Professionals and other service providers see the change as offering greater opportunities for collaboration and to work more directly with a wider variety of kids. As one psychologist said, "it will mean a move away from being an 'assessment machine.'"

- School boards

    School board trustees see the change as "a long, long journey." They welcome the flexibility that the Framework will offer at the divisional level, with no "blanket policies" and the opportunity to respect individual and local contexts. At the same time, they noted that boards are held accountable for student performance and are compared to other jurisdictions. They said: If Alberta Education changes the rules, they will need to change accountability.

How stakeholders will prepare for change

- Political will and financial support

    Participants said there need to be clear political will to enact the changes. They also said Alberta Education needs to be present, working to develop relationships and operating in a more active mentor role, and less as an auditor.

- Implementation plan

    Participants said change needs to be guided by a progressive implementation plan, that is, one that clearly sets out short-, mid- and long-term strategies.

- More information needed

    Stakeholders said they need to better understand the funding model and how it will contribute to equity in services across the province. Participants also said they need more information on how students will be identified, in the absence of a coding system. Some participants said they need to know if Individualized Program Plans (IPP) will still be used and, if so, how they are to be built using an asset-based approach

- Stakeholder engagement/buy-in

    In addition to direct stakeholders, including students, parents and teachers, participants said post-secondary, medical and other stakeholders must buy-in to the new direction. They said targeted communication, education and engagement is needed to bring people on-side.

- Student information

    Participants said they will need timely access to student records and data banks. This will mean Alberta Education will need to develop a non-burdensome (to schools), provincial approach to student information management.

- Resources and classroom supports

Participants said specific resources and classroom supports will have to be developed and in place for implementation. They asked: Who will develop these materials? Will they be developed in-house or accessed through a central (provincial) source? Participants would like to see provincial standards for the use of technology and resource materials in every classroom. They said teaching assistants will need to be trained and tests will have to be prepared that match new curricula and learning approaches. They also asked: What will happen to resource rooms in this new Framework?

Goal 2: Capacity

The education system is equipped, resourced and ready to support and respond to the needs of all students in an inclusive way

What change will mean for students

- Direct benefits

Participants saw a number of benefits to students from this change. They said students will have more consistency in instruction and teaching experience, which will help to standardize learning opportunities. They believed that students will be at the centre of the discussion and their input will be sought and valued along with that of their parents.

- Home and school connection

Participants said this change will to put home and school "on the same page," with parents as true and active members of the learning team. They also said it will allow students to access neighborhood schools, if that is the student's or family's preference.

- Meeting (and not meeting) needs

While most participants said the change will adequately respond to the challenges of students with severe disabilities, some were concerned that students with mild/moderate needs may not receive the supports they need.

What change will mean to other stakeholders

- Learning teams and learning coaches

Participants liked the idea of learning teams and said learning teams could help ensure more informed decision-making processes – assuming all members of the learning team, including parents, are accepted as valuable contributors. However, participants wanted clarity on the composition of the learning teams, asking: Will they be multi-disciplinary? Learning coaches were also seen as valuable additions to schools, acting as key contacts in each school and offering individualized responses to different children in different situations.

- Parents

Parent involvement was also seen as contributing to better alignment between student learning and family goals.

- Teachers

Teachers said the change could mean improved instruction and completion of learning outcomes. They encouraged the use of mentorship programs for teacher development and training. At the same time, they said ensure the change does not put additional demands on teachers, who are already stretched to the limit.

- School boards

Some participants said school boards need to actively be involved in lower levels of the education system to effectively asses the needs of individual schools and ensure appropriate supports are in place.

How stakeholders will prepare for change

- Training and professional development

Participants said training is needed to equip those who interact most directly with students with the skills they need to support and encourage student learning. They said training for teachers, teaching assistants and parents will have to be developed and implemented. As such, they said post-secondary education programs will need to take this philosophical shift into account. Participants also said training and development for other professionals will need to reflect the shift required by the Framework.

- Recruitment of learning coaches

Participants said learning coaches will need to be recruited from across Alberta. They expressed concern about finding the right people for these positions, particularly in rural areas. Some suggested that a protocol be developed for "sharing" coaches between schools in order to ensure there are sufficient coaches to meet the need.

- Provincial standards

Participants said change in this area will be facilitated by provincial standards for educational quality, professional-student ratios and teacher-student classroom ratios.

- Facility modification and enhancement

Participants said facilities, transportation and other infrastructure will need to be modified or enhanced to ensure student needs can be readily and equitably met across the province.

Goal 3: Collaboration

A collaborative process to support children, students, communities, schools and families is evident across Government of Alberta Ministries.

What change will mean for students

- Better service, less stress

Participants said greater collaboration would mean more direct benefits to students. They said students will be encouraged to be active participants in their own education and will have the opportunity to set their own direction. Earlier screening would mean earlier access to services and supports, while wraparound services would provide additional educational tools to students who are entering the school system and would mean fewer interruptions to classroom/learning time. Collaboration would also help to improve transitions, they said, especially for younger students.

- Inclusion

Participants liked the understanding of inclusion used by the Framework and said an inclusive school helps to provide an inclusive community for all students.

- Reduced barriers

Participants said increased collaboration will help to remove non-academic barriers to learning for students.

What change will mean to other stakeholders

- Enhanced relationships

Participants said increased wraparound services will provide an opportunity for the community to take a more active role in the education of Alberta's students. They said greater collaboration will help to dissolve current barriers between schools and communities. Participants also saw the potential for improved relationships between home and school, with parents recognized as partners.

- Success

Participants said collaboration will increase the likelihood of success for the new Framework.

- Better use of resources

Participants were hopeful that the new Framework would mean more consistent and predictable funding for school divisions, which would result in greater program and service consistency across the province. They saw collaboration as helping to reduce duplication of service, freeing up more dollars for the education of students.

- Outstanding questions

Participants had a number of outstanding questions about the Framework and its impact on themselves and other stakeholders. These questions included: How will funding for in-school wraparound services be provided? Will education dollars be used for health issues? Where do professionals' salaries come from? How will currently maxed-out physical plants make room for these new services? Will there be consistent provision of services to home-schooled students?

How stakeholders will prepare for change

- Collaboration plan

Participants said there needs to be a clear plan for collaboration that includes authority, accountability, decision making powers, guidelines for sharing and protecting information, parental authority, student privacy, and all related issues.

- Mandated collaboration

Some participants said education is a universal responsibility and, therefore, collaboration should be mandated at the Ministerial level of government. At the same time, they said mandated collaboration must be complemented by sincere cooperation of the ministries and professionals involved in wrap-around service provision.

- Plan for FNMI students

Some participants said a plan need to be developed that will specifically address access to services by First Nations, Metis and Inuit students.

- Communication plan

Participants said students and parents should be well-informed about the availability of services and how to access them. Some suggested that the education system provide people to act as "system navigators" for students and families. Others said the province needs to have an "aggressive" communications plan.

3. Advice for Implementation

At the end of the second day, forum participants were invited to provide direct and specific advice to Alberta Education to guide implementation of the Setting the Direction Framework. Much of their advice reemphasized points that were made in the earlier sessions. The following is a summary of their advice.

- **Keep what is working**

  Participants cautioned against making changes too quickly or removing supports from students "too early" before other supports are in place. They said do not lose sight of educating students now, while making changes for the future. Participants encouraged the province to identify and keep best practices. They also said diversity and choice must be retained in the goals and outcomes.

- **Change takes time**

  Participants recognized that the new direction will require significant attitudinal and behavioral change among stakeholders, effectively shifting the culture in schools and the broader education system. They said this process will take time and rushing to implement change could actually stifle the opportunity to achieve true reform.

- **Stay student centred**

  While most participants felt that the Framework will move us toward a more student centred system, they strongly advised the government to keep students front and centre – both as individuals and as a population. Some were concerned that inclusive education would "paint all students with one brush," overshadowing individual talents and accomplishments by attempting to treat all students the same. They said all students should have access to the elements of choice, reflection, goal-setting and self-advocacy. At the same time, they said do not create another "special education" system by treating some students differently

- **Put resources and supports in place**

  Participants said resources and supports must be in place before implementation. They said "don't raise expectations, especially among parents and students, and then fail to deliver because of a lack of resources."

- **Address implications for teachers**

  Participants said the Framework could have a number of implications for teachers that will need to be addressed prior to implementation, including the *Teaching Quality Standards*, collective agreements, workload, pre-service and in-service training and ongoing professional development.

- **Acknowledge differences**

  Many participants said not every school district is the same, and an approach to implementation must cater to the diverse needs schools. They highlighted, in particular, the differences between urban and rural schools and school districts.

- **Cross-ministry approach**

  Participants said cross-ministerial cooperation is crucial and all levels of government, jurisdictions and ministries must be on board before implementation. At the same time, they said a successful cross-ministry approach must be seen to have the Premier's unconditional support.

- Involve stakeholders in implementation planning

Participants advised Alberta Education to involve key stakeholders in implementation planning, including students, parents, teachers/administrators, professionals and service providers, as well as post-secondary institutions. Involvement will help to build trust and guard against "turf protection" that could impede implementation of the Framework. They said an implementation plan should clearly define roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders, and should include refined definitions for core concepts, such as inclusion, services, accountability, learning teams, student success, etc.

- Provide appropriate resources

Some participants were concerned about the cost of the new direction, saying "this system will likely cost much more than current practice." They advised Alberta Education to do a complete cost analysis before determining how to invest scarce resources. At the same time, participants said "do not skimp" – funding must be adequate to ensure student success. They advised the government to explore funding models and to change the funding approach "last."

- Communicate often and well

Participants said implementation of the Framework must be open, transparent and accountable. They said Alberta Education must develop an effective communication strategy and tools to facilitate implementation. The goals and timelines should be widely communicated to stakeholders and the broader public, and stakeholders should be consulted, when appropriate.

- Monitor implementation

Participants advised Alberta education to monitor implementation of the Framework, measuring change incrementally and developmentally while giving the process time to work and change to take hold in the system.

Conclusion

Input from participants in the Minister's Forum indicates that Albertans are ready for significant system reform. They are excited by the philosophy and promise of the Setting the Direction Framework but they are cautious about proceeding too quickly. They were clear that Setting the Direction is a long-term change process – not a short-term fix. Although some dissent remains and caution flags are being held up by various stakeholder groups, the Framework is largely supported by stakeholders and can move toward implementation.

PHASE 1

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

1. **Community consultation sessions** were held in 10 communities 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. Proceedings were recorded by notetakers. Written notes were then reviewed, coded and entered into SPSS 16.0 for collation and analysis.

2. A **public survey** was conducted in November and December 2008 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 hardcopy. 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.

PHASE 2

1. **Community consultation sessions** were held in communities across Alberta in March 2009. The purpose of the community consultation sessions was to:

   • Affirm what was heard in the Phase 1 consultations and to determine whether this input was adequately reflected in a draft Vision, Mission and Principles for the Setting the Direction Initiative;

   • Share a proposed system re-design to support achieving the Vision; and

   • Obtain further ideas and advice on moving change forward.

Participants included parents, teachers, school officials, service providers, school board representatives, government representatives and other interested stakeholder.

A number of mechanisms were used to record input from the consultation sessions, including:

   • A paper "placemat," which participants were invited to complete as a group/table to provide structured feedback on the proposed Vision, Mission and Principles;

   • Transcription of flipcharts used in small group discussions on the five building blocks;

   • Notes taken by designated notetakers; and

   • Observations recorded and reported by the session Moderator.

These qualitative data were then reviewed, collated and analyzed to identify common themes.

2. A **public survey** was conducted through an online and hardcopy discussion guide and questionnaire, available in both French and English. The purpose of the public survey was to measure the extent to which Albertans support the proposed Vision, Mission and Principles and the specific elements, or building blocks, that will contribute to one education system that supports all students.

A total of 2,088 questionnaires were completed, including 1,819 completed by individual respondents and 269 completed by groups. Groups ranged in size from 2 to 200 members, representing some 3,427 individuals. Teachers represented over half of all respondents. Other notable groups included parents, teaching assistants, school administrators/principals and service providers.

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.

3. A **youth survey** was conducted 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 Phase 1 were established. The discussion netted some interesting information that 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.
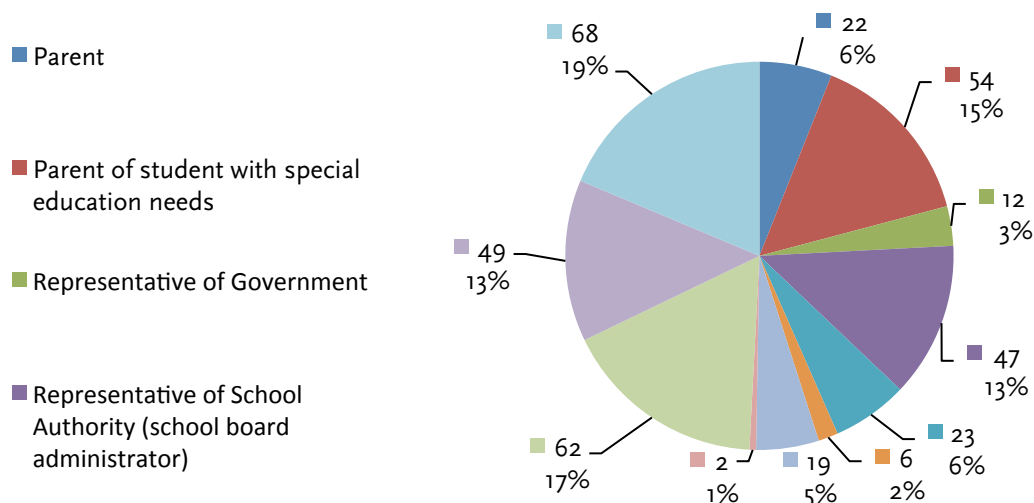
Participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire (on a postcard) that asked them to rank a series of ideas – from 1 to 3 – that could help to build an inclusive education system in Alberta. A total of 434 questionnaires were completed. The average age of respondents was 15.73 years.

Participants in the Minister's Forum were invited to complete an Evaluation Form, assessing Organization, Forum Participation, and Components. They were also given an opportunity to comment on what they liked about the forum and what they would have done differently. 327 evaluations were submitted. Breakdown of respondents is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Respondents by Type

- Parent
- Parent of student with special education needs
- Representative of Government
- Representative of School Authority (school board administrator)

68 19%
22 6%
54 15%
12 3%
47 13%
23 6%
6 2%
19 5%
2 1%
62 17%
49 13%

Forum Organization

Most of those who completed the evaluation agreed that the forum was well-organized (317 respondents) and that the registration process was satisfactory (303). A majority of respondents (189) said that the forum provided adequate information to gain an understanding of the Framework, while 86 neither agreed nor disagreed that this was their experience. Overall satisfaction with the Forum was declared by 220 respondents, with 19 expressing dissatisfaction, and the remaining 78 respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Figure 2: Evaluation of Forum Organization

Organization

- Well organized
- Registration was satisfactory
- Adequate information
- Overall satisfaction

300
200
100
0

1   2   3   4   5
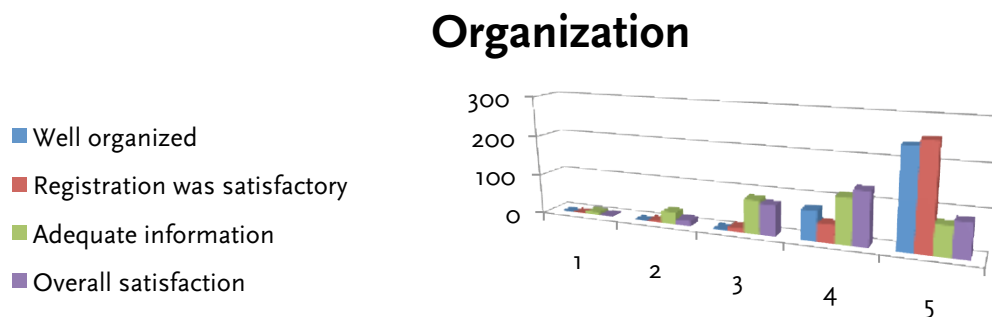
Forum Participation

The majority of evaluation respondents were satisfied with the opportunities for forum participation provided to them. 237 respondents agreed that the information and presentations provided by the forum allowed for meaningful participation by them; 277 found they had adequate opportunities for interaction with other forum participants; 265 said they had opportunity to participate meaningfully in discussions and were able to share their ideas. The majority (273) also found that the facilitator created and maintained an atmosphere that encouraged and enabled everyone to hear and contribute ideas.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with Participation in Forum

Forum Participation

- Information and presentations
- Interaction with others
- Meaningful participation
- Able to share ideas
- Facilitator
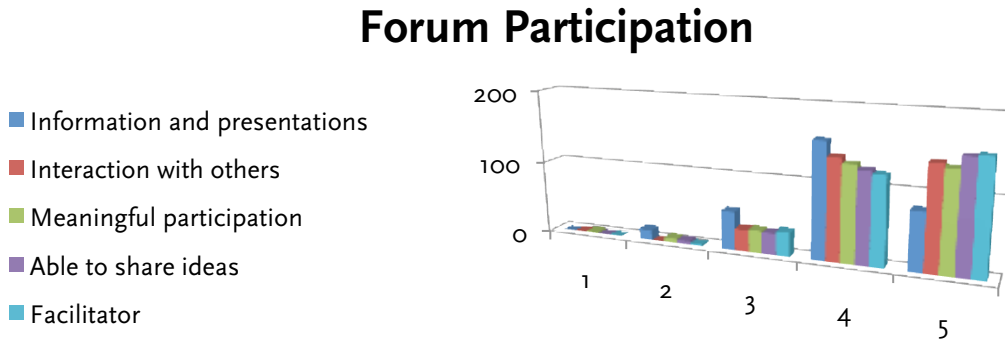
Forum Components

Respondents were invited to evaluate how informative they found six of the components of the forum: the keynote address by Martin Brokenleg; the video presentation of the Framework; the presentation on Funding and Accountability by Tom Parrish; the Perspectives panel; the small group discussions; and the youth panel.

The keynote address received the largest number of ratings as informative (304), with no one finding it not informative. The presentation on Funding and Accountability received the most ratings of not informative, at 56, with 143 respondents rating it as informative. 245 of respondents said they found the small group discussions informative, 232 rated the Perspectives panel informative, and 199 said the same of the youth panel.

Figure 4: Evaluation of Forum Components

Components

- Martin Brokenleg
- Video presentation
- Tom Parrish
- Panel
- Small groups
- Youth panel
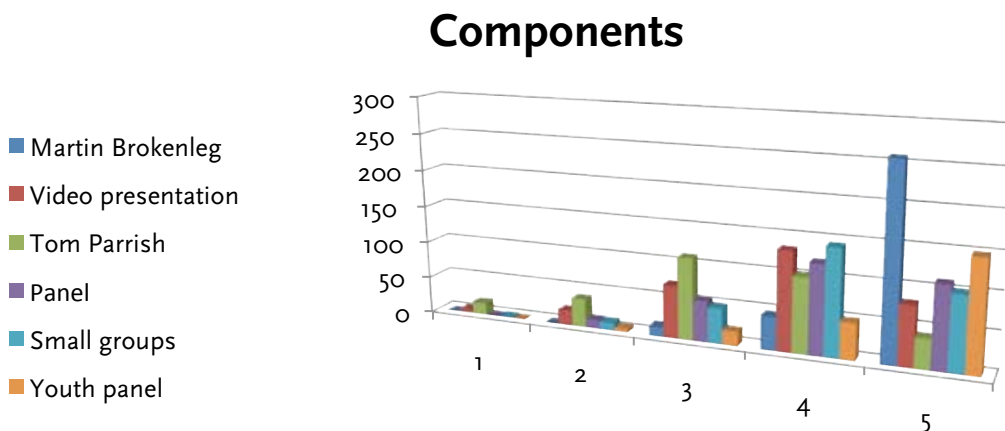
Liked Best

Respondents pointed to the diversity of the participants, the wide variety of perspectives this offered in the small group discussions, the quality of the keynote and panel presentations, the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the Framework discussion, and the overall organization and tone of the forum as the things they liked best about the forum.

One respondent said, "Great to hear a variety of perspectives and to know that these are being represented and heard. Great overall facilitation and organization."

Another said, "I am glad that there was opportunity to have input without just having to hear about the Framework as a done deal. I really appreciate that the government has taken the effort to hear our voices…"

Others commented that "[I liked best] the small group discussions because that is where I heard other perspectives and was able to make my unique perspective heard" and "I particularly enjoyed the keynote presentation. It was a powerful message about the importance of belonging, respect and overall focus and engagement of the child/youth."

Would Have Done Differently

The suggestion made most often by those who responded to this question (53 times) was to provide more specific details of the implementation and operation of the Framework. Some comments were broad, saying that things were "Too vague" and asking that the government "Provide more specifics and less motherhood generalities." Others specified what they found lacking: "What can be done to phase-in this Vision?"; "Be more specific about re: structuring of the education system, pathway and funding"; and "More details about funding to make educators feel confident in your sincerity about the new model."

More than 20 respondents also suggested that providing forum materials well in advance would have allowed them to participate more meaningfully and benefit more fully from the information presented. As one person summarized it, "If we had some of the documents ahead of time (Phase 2, What We Heard, Proposed Framework) we could be responding to it more constructively. As it is, we were being asked to respond to something we are just beginning to get our heads around."

The next most frequent response was "Nothing" or "Done very well!"

Several respondents said that they found too much money was spent on delivering the forum. A few believed that "A lot of money was spent on food and folders that could have paid for some school supports", and others said, "Looks like a lot of money was spent on this. Please don't let it be wasted."

When looking at Curriculum, Capacity, and Collaboration, participants said that these areas are interconnected and affect one another.

Curriculum

When looking at curriculum and programming recommendations, we heard the participants request that this framework take differentiated learning to another level and focus on teaching students how to learn and de-emphasize the traditional system of content-based learning.

Participants agreed that eliminating coding and labeling was a positive change that would lead to the elimination of "special education". We heard however, participants express the risk that without coding some students may go unidentified. Participants said that any data gathering system will have to be carefully examined.

Many participants expressed some concerns that the framework was not fully clear or comprehensive. They did say that in response to that frustration, the task ahead was to work out the details together and move forward with the big ideas.

Participants said that teachers are central to the delivery of a flexible curriculum and their success is measured by the support they have to adapt curriculum successfully. Participants said that they are hopeful about the proposed curriculum shifts because the emphasis is on seeing the student first, and their needs second. They repeated that support for teachers is key to success. Participants clearly said that while the framework addressed the critical role of teachers it is important to bear in mind that they may not feel confident in addressing a broad spectrum of learner needs – which is where support comes into play. Participants pointed out that adapting the curriculum is no small task, particularly when you consider that each learner situation is unique.

When discussing inclusive education, participants said that smaller class sizes are key to the success of inclusions.

Participants were realistic and honest about how hard the work of teaching is – and how high the burn out rate can be. They cautioned not to let this framework be a recipe for increased stress.

Participants identified the importance of language and terminology, and that one of the key elements of any cultural shift will be a shared understanding of terminology.

Participants said that the curriculum goal area needs to look more closely at the transition of students to post-secondary settings. Not only is the tendency to teach to the test an issue for participants, so is the school system's focus on being a filter for post secondary schools. If students are learning "how" to learn, the entire system of sifting and sorting students for post-secondary needs to be re-thought. We heard participants say that a modified curriculum has to be clear, accessible, and age-appropriate – with accompanying assessment to match. Participants said there is a real place for universal design in the curriculum re-think.

Participants reminded us that in regards to curriculum, there are excellent practices in place across the province. You want to leverage what is already being done successfully in order to herald the positive changes in practice.

Participants support the development of assessment tools that are flexible and allow students to play to their strengths. They said this is a long overdue idea, and participants heard examples of how students can successfully demonstrate their learning if they are given the chance.

Participants asked, "What does it mean to be an Alberta graduate?" They asked what do we want young people to experience in the education system. This question is being considered by the Inspiring Education' conversations. In an education system that still has real similarity to its origins 100 years ago, perhaps the time has come for significant reform.

Participants said that the framework represents a paradigm shift that will affect everyone involved – including the community.

Another prevailing point was to be sure that accountability measures are robust enough to ensure that funding is applied to meeting the special education needs of students and not to something else.

Participants were encouraged by the notion of focusing on the Learning Team, but made the point that time to meet is critical, as is a clear delineation of each team members' role. We head that working as a Learning Team is a more holistic way of thinking and ultimately will be better for students when the home and school perspective is melded together.

Participants said they are already using learning coaches, and that practice works. They said it is an example of a shared best practice that begins to become the norm, and the role of learning coaches will have to be clearly spelled out. We head that some student's conditions are so rare that school based expertise will definitely need to be augmented. Participants cautioned not to over burden a learning coach and ensure that they still have access to specialized experts when required.

Capacity

Participants said that a key component of capacity building is teacher training, and also said that the pre-service part of training is only the beginning. We heard participants say that teachers need to have easy access to ongoing training in inclusive education throughout their careers. They said to be sure to use the available technologies such as video conferencing for ongoing training. Participants said that this is not only a tool for students, but it can be an invaluable and cost effective way to connect teachers with one another and with mentors.

Participants support the idea of training and professional development for teaching assistants. They were clear that this work is vital, professional, and essential. Participants clearly said that professional training should be supported and appropriately funded.

Rural participants flagged their own specific concern about para-professionals. They said they are hard to find in rural Alberta, so while raising the level of professionalism is a good idea, it may add to recruitment issues in rural Alberta.

When discussing eliminating IPP's, participants said that this will up the ante for increased communication in schools and with families. Less paper will mean more talking. We heard the call for the necessity to build time into a teacher's work life for collaborative work. Time and adequate resources were dominant themes throughout discussions about capacity building.

Members of the deaf community said that there should be provincial standards of training and qualifications for interpreters.

A key positive element regarding capacity was that participants said it has the potential to close the home and school gap.

Participants made the point that sharing student information between partners needs to be more streamlined and easier because precious time and information is lost from year to year when student records are not forwarded efficiently.

Participants also talked about the importance of the student's role on the learning team. Their self-advocacy and having their voice heard is an important element of building capacity. Capacity building made participants hopeful because if we build capacity they said, then positive change is possible, and it will foster mutual trust and respect and a true acknowledgement that each perspective has value.

Collaboration

When discussing collaboration, participants said, "It's the right thing to do." We heard that collaboration may be daunting, and raises complex issues such as the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPP), mandate clashes, and the tendency to operate in siloed, turf protectionist ways. We heard that participants liked the idea of mandated collaboration because they said it offers a guarantee of continuity even if the Minister changes, but also cautioned that collaboration is difficult to mandate. It's a new way of working, participants said, and it will take time for new collaborative behaviors to emerge and become natural.

Participants said they are excited about collaboration as it holds such possibility, but roles are going to have to be clearly defined.

Participants said a collaborative model raises expectations, and anxiety, and so clarity and communication will be the lynchpin of making collaboration possible and successful. We heard participants say that at best, collaboration is less cumbersome and allows for less duplication, but they also said that new protocols will need to be in place in order for it to be possible. These protocols need to be simple, straightforward, and non-bureaucratic.

Participants said that integrated information technology is a key tool in making collaboration work. They said collaboration will take a whole new set of Ministry behaviors and will require support at the highest level. We heard participants say that collaboration is a horizontal practice of trusting one another and behaving as equals. Participants said that collaboration can be done, but will require patience.

One word resounded throughout all the conversations we heard: support. Participants expressed great optimism, enthusiasm, and caution. Participants were clear that the proposed changes will not happen without support from teachers and school authorities, and a shift to shared responsibility. We heard participants say that in a culture of shared responsibility, when inclusive education is not working, it is not an opportunity to scold, punish, or ignore. Participants said that as this initiative moves forward, we must learn from each other, and support each other.

Participants called for Alberta Education to be present at the local level, taking a relationship based approach to mentorship and support.

Participants were clear that *Setting the Direction* needs to take the long view, and is not a short term approach. This level of system reform should begin now, and remain focused on the long-term.