

Navigating the Education System when your child or youth has mental health challenges



The Right to an Education

The Facts

- Every child and youth in Canada has the right to an education, which is guaranteed by provincial law. The law is inclusive and therefore applies to those with mental health challenges.
- Elementary and secondary public schools are obliged under this law to take the measures needed to reasonably accommodate the special requirements of your child¹.
- The Education Act provides for special education services to all students in need, supported along a continuum of programs and services that include differentiated programming in a regular classroom and accommodations outlined in the Individual Education Plan (IEP). In cases where someone is identified as having behaviour exceptionalities related to mental health, the process of the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) provides for a combination of education and mental health supports in a therapeutic classroom setting.
- According to Regulation 306 of the Education Act, every school board is tasked with preparing an IEP for students with exceptionalities. The plan must be reviewed annually to reflect relevant changes.
- School boards must establish committees and appeal boards to ensure provision of appropriate special education based on a process of careful assessment.

A Word to Parents

- Mental health symptoms are expressed through behaviour, so provision of appropriate educational supports will depend on the accurate interpretation of behaviour. Therefore, it is important for parents to work collaboratively with educators to explain observed behaviours within a mental health context.
- When families work closely with mental health teams and the school, the best possible outcome is that educational supports will reflect the particular needs of the student.
- School can be very challenging for students with mental health concerns. Focusing on successes and teasing out the stressors will be key to students' success.

The Process: The IPRC and the IEP

The Facts

- The Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) will determine whether the student can be considered exceptional. The exceptionality categories are defined by the Ministry of Education as: communication, behaviour, intellectual, physical and multiple. Identification of exceptionalities forms the basis for delivery of special education programs and services.
- As parent or guardian you may ask the school to request an IPRC meeting to discuss your child's needs and to assess exceptionality. This is done with the written permission of the parent or guardian.
- The goal of the IPRC is to assess whether your child is an exceptional learner and if so, to decide on the best placement and the most appropriate mix of supports and resources to address your child's strengths and needs as identified.

- As a parent or guardian you have the right to attend the IPRC meeting where your child’s needs will be discussed, and if you don’t agree with their recommendations, you have the option of an appeal. It is highly recommended that parents or guardians be involved in this process and every school board provides a Parent Guide with information on Special Education processes and services and resources for their district.
- The IPRC process is increasingly reserved for access to certain specialized programs. Therefore, it is important to note that you do not have to go through an IPRC to get an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for your child.
- The IEP is not legally binding. It is a “living” document which is reviewed at every reporting period and modified as necessary in consultation with parents.

A Word to Parents

- Educate yourself on the programs, services, and resources offered by your school board to support your child with mental health challenges. Consult resources in this pamphlet and don’t be afraid to ask questions to the appropriate authorities.
- Your child is entitled to receive support through the school if there are difficulties. As an engaged parent, it is important to work collaboratively with school staff to explore the full range of supports and services available to meet your child’s needs.
- Many interventions, including the development of an IEP, should be considered before going to an IPRC.

Resources

- Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton
www.ldaottawa.com
- Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
www.ldao.ca
- Ottawa Carleton Assembly of School Councils, ‘What You Should Know About the IPRC Process’
www.ottawaspecialeducation.org
- Ottawa Catholic School Board, Special Education/Student Services
www.ocsb.ca
- Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Identification Placement and Review Committee Parent Guide
www.ocdsb.ca
- Ontario Ministry of Education, Special Education
www.edu.gov.on.ca
- Individual Education Plans (IEP) Samples, Resources to Support the Development and Implementation of Effective IEPs in Ontario
www.ontariodirectors.ca
- Ontario Ministry of Education, Resolving Identification or Placement Issues, Procedures for Parents/Guardians
www.edu.gov.on.ca

Possible Accommodations

Within the school

- Parents can request a team meeting with school board experts to determine the best supports for their child. School boards are able to access a wide range of expertise to help students with mental health challenges, such as guidance counselors, student success teachers, special education consultants, psychologists, social workers, psycho-educational assessment experts, behavioural consultants, mental health and addiction nurses, resource teachers, educational assistants, and special education practitioners.
- It may be helpful to know that the school can put supports in place without having an assessment or even a diagnosis of mental illness.

Options under the IEP

Within the school

- In the regular classroom, the accommodations possible under an IEP might include such things as a seating assignment designed to reduce distractions, extra time to finish assignments, or the option to retreat to a quiet space as needed. Some schools are able to offer a resource room or guidance area where students can work at their own pace with the help of a teacher or educational assistant.
- The school might suggest accommodations within the regular classroom such as a flexible timetable or a modified school day for students who aren't well enough to attend a full day of school. This kind of accommodation is often a respite rather than a long-term solution.
- Sometimes a special class is available in the student's regular school that is smaller than a regular classroom with provision for more individual help from teachers so students can work at their own pace.

Day Treatment in a Therapeutic Classroom

- When students with mental illness need more support than their own school can offer, they can be assessed for Day Treatment, a therapeutic classroom with additional mental health supports.
- In Ottawa, referrals for Day Treatment, also known as Section 23, go through Coordinated Access for presentation to the Coordinated Referral Committee, which assembles child mental health professionals to determine how a student could benefit from a therapeutic classroom setting. The purpose of coordination is to ensure that educational and therapeutic partners work together in considering the child's needs.
- In Ottawa, mental health agencies partner with the school boards (M.F. McHugh Education Centre and Le Transit) to operate therapeutic classrooms located at various schools within their districts. This may vary by school district so it is important to contact your local school board or refer to their website. The following link will identify the appropriate school board for your area: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/sbinfo/
- With involvement from their student services, each school board has its own process for determining Section 23 admission. Contact the school board to inquire what Section 23 programs are available because the range of programs and the method of access vary from school board to school board.
- The IPRC committee cannot recommend Day Treatment. IPRC and Day Treatment are two separate processes.
- Psychological testing is required for the Coordinated Access and Referral process. This testing can be done by the mental health treatment team, or by the School Board, and in some cases if a family chooses to and can afford it, the testing can be conducted by private practice psychologists. Some employee benefit packages cover this cost. A range of cognitive abilities as well as social, emotional, and behavioural functioning can be assessed by this testing to guide the optimum learning environment for the student with mental health challenges.
- Therapeutic classroom programs under Section 23 offer highly supported individual learning, usually for a limited timeframe and with the purpose of re-integrating the student into a regular classroom when appropriate.

A Word to Parents

- When students experience symptoms of mental illness in school, it is crucial that their right to dignity be protected and they are treated with care and respect.
- The student's right to privacy will be best served by a parent or guardian understanding how best to share personal information with the school. Although school-based information must go into the Ontario Student Record (OSR), other kinds of information related to the student's mental health (such as assessment, treatment and discharge information) can be shared with school staff to help them better support the child, but kept out of the OSR. It is wise for parents to ask for discretionary options available to them regarding access to such records.
- Notwithstanding the student's right to privacy, schools cannot be supportive unless parents are willing to share information that helps them understand the child's individual strengths and needs. This collaboration between families and schools will ensure that your child receives the most effective educational supports with the least amount of assumption or guesswork on the part of the school and in a caring, inclusive, and respectful learning environment.

- The principal of your child's school, in consultation with parents or guardians, prepares and submits the Coordinated Access and Referral application. However, parents or guardians can ask the principal or members of the mental health team to initiate the process. Parental consent is required no matter where the request originates.
- Parents or guardians going through the process of Coordinated Access and Referral should be aware in advance of what is involved. Read the online resources in this pamphlet and ask your questions to mental health service providers and your child's school, who have the responsibility for walking you through the process so you're well prepared.
- Of course, it is the prerogative of parents or guardians to refuse a therapeutic placement and appeal the decision if discussions with educators and mental health providers cannot resolve their concerns.

Resources

- Ottawa Children's Coordinated Access & Referral to Services: www.coordinatedaccess.ca
- People for Education Tips for Parents, Special Education, www.peopleforeducation.ca
- M.F. McHugh Education Centre: www2.ocdsb.on.ca
- Ottawa Catholic School Board, Accessibility Committee: www.ocsb.ca
- L'école Le Transit, amalgamation of various centers that provide services to students with special needs serving francophone community of both the public and Catholic School Board: www.letransit.cepeo.on.ca
- Association des conseillères et conseillers des écoles publiques de l'Ontario (ACÉPO) www.acepo.org/fr
- Association of School Boards of Ontario (ACEPO): www.acepo.org/en

During Hospitalization

- When students are hospitalized for mental health treatment, they may engage in their studies for short periods of each day. The student's regular school will be contacted if consent by the parent or guardian of a child over 12 years is granted, and a hospital teacher will work with the student inside the hospital, when appropriate.
- You are not required to share your child's medical discharge information with school representatives. However, communicating aspects of the action plan that are relevant to education, such as specific triggers and strategies to address them in the school, will be valuable for everyone involved.
- Sharing information with the school is always at the discretion of the parent, guardian, or child over the age of 12. When educational and therapeutic providers are well informed, everyone benefits. However, refusal to share certain information will not prevent school staff from providing support to your child, to the best of their ability.
- One of the stressors for students returning to school after a period of hospitalization is how to explain their absence to peers. It is advisable for students to plan and even practice what they will say and to whom ahead of time. It is always important for your child to have your unqualified support, in this as in related matters. Mental health and addiction nurses in the secondary schools can help prepare students for returning to school and provide ongoing support in the school once they return. You can request their involvement through your mental health team or principal or directly through the Community Care Access Centre (CCAC): www.healthcareathome.ca

Alternative Schooling

- Alternative schools provide a learning environment for students to complete one course at a time. In considering this option, make sure that program requirements are a realistic fit for your child, for instance how flexible the school might be on attendance, considering the possibility that some students may not be able to attend with perfect regularity. Not all school districts offer alternative schools so contact your school board for more details.

- Adult High Schools are for youth over 18 years of age. Once again, it will be important to support a student to meet with the principal and explore the fit between student needs and school policies.
- Ottawa-Carleton English Public Board Adult High School:
www.adulths.ocdsb.ca
- Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board:
www.adulths.ottawacatholicschools.ca
- The Independent Learning Centre/Ask a Teacher service is funded by the Ministry of Education and offers a free online service connecting students in Grades 9-12 with Ontario Certified teachers in online chat rooms. Using text and a virtual whiteboard, students receive one-on-one tutoring in Math, Sciences, and English in real time: **www.ilc.org**
- Canada eSchool and Ottawa Carleton E-School are private high schools authorized by the Ministry of Education in Ontario to grant credits in over 100 online high school courses that lead to the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), and are accepted by universities and colleges in Canada, the UK and around the world: **www.canadaeschool.ca**

Post Secondary Education

- **Disability Centres:** Most Ontario colleges and universities offer special services for students with disabilities, including mental illness. Each institution has its own program. At the post-secondary level, accommodations are only granted for youth with diagnosed disabilities.

Disability Centres in Eastern Ontario:

- Algonquin College: **www3.algonquincollege.com/csd**
- La Cité collégiale: **www.collegelacite.ca**
- University of Ottawa: **www.sass.uottawa.ca/access**
- Carleton University: **www1.carleton.ca/pmc**
- **Mature Student Status:** If a youth misses completion of high school and ages out of the public system at the age of 21 years, he or she has the option to apply for admission to a university or college as a mature student. Check the websites of institutions you're interested in for more information on how to proceed.

Advocating for Your Child

- As parent or guardian, you possess uniquely valuable insights and information regarding your child that helps you to become his or her best advocate. Keep a log with dates and observations to help you stay centered and calm in meetings with educators and mental health providers.
- A student's rights are protected under the Education Act but there is room for interpretation where behaviours are concerned, and differences from school to school. While it is always preferable to try and resolve problems at the first or most immediate level, never hesitate to appeal to a higher authority when necessary.
- When advocating on behalf of your child it is helpful to use a team approach and consider yourself an integral member of the team. Bringing someone to take notes at key meetings can be helpful but check to see whether the school requires notice of who will be attending.
- "Help me to understand how we are going to support this student" is the tone that will be most productive for team meetings and case conferences. A spirit of collaboration goes a long way.
- Having a list of points you would like to have addressed at meetings will help keep emotions at bay and ensure that nothing is forgotten. Whenever possible, communication or follow-up to meetings by email is advisable because it provides a helpful paper trail for the student's team and can be quickly updated.
- It can be a great help to have "go to" person to act as the student's ally at school.
- With the right modeling from parents, children can learn to advocate for themselves. This is a life lesson learned in small steps that will carry them far. Involving the student in as many aspects of the process as possible is empowering and helps them to understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities.
- Teaching your children (and reminding yourself) that mutual respect will advance genuine collaboration is a gift.

A Final Thought for Parents

- There may be a point in your child's development when mental health must be the primary focus and education has to take a back seat for the time being. Pushing education when a child is unable to focus or when other stressors are overwhelming can be counter-productive. The good news is that with appropriate supports from parents, mental health providers, and the education system, students can resume their education at any time.

School Boards

- Ottawa Catholic School Board
www.ocsb.ca
- Ottawa Carleton District School Board
www.ocdsb.ca
- Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario
www.cdsbeo.on.ca
- Renfrew County Catholic District School Board
www.rccdsb.edu.on.ca
- Renfrew County District School Board
www.renfrew.edu.on.ca
- Upper Canada District School Board
www.ucdsb.on.ca
- Conseil des écoles catholiques du Centre-Est (CECCE)
www.ecolecatholique.ca/en
- Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario
www.cepeo.on.ca
- Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'Est Ontarien
www.csdceo.ca

Additional Resources

- Ottawa Special Education
www.ottawaspecialeducation.org
- Ontario Ministry of Education Special Ed
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/speced.html
- Ottawa Network for Education
www.onfe-rope.ca
- Ontario Human Rights Commission, Elementary and Secondary Education
www.ohrc.on.ca
- People for Education
www.peopleforeducation.ca
- Alternative schools, e-mental health
www.ementalhealth.ca

Parents' Lifelines

Families for child & youth mental health



613.321.3211

Ottawa

1.855.775.7005

Renfrew County – Prescott Russell
Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry
North Lanark-North Grenville

About this brochure

This brochure is intended as guidelines for parents and while accurate for the Ottawa school Boards at time of printing, is subject to change and/or may not apply in regions governed by other school boards.

.Disclaimer

Information in this brochure may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.