

BACK TO SCHOOL DURING COVID-19

An advocacy toolkit for
parents and caregivers of
diverse learners



Advocacy

Advocacy is about securing, protecting and advancing the rights of one's self or others. Diverse learners have rights within their school divisions. School boards are responsible for implementing programs in compliance with current legislation and regulations.

However, in these unprecedented times, parents and caregivers may have to clearly advocate to ensure that their child's rights are being met at school. With Alberta schools planning for the Fall 2020 re-entry, it is important for parents and caregivers know what that will look like for their children.

Many parents and caregivers have been put in a situation where they are being asked to make decisions about their child's return to school without necessarily having all the information needed to make an informed decision. In this situation, it is certainly acceptable for parents to advocate for their child by requesting further information.

This document has been designed as a general advocacy toolkit for parents and caregivers so that they can feel better prepared to advocate for their child's needs and make informed decisions about their child's return to school this fall. It was developed by Autism Edmonton in collaboration with Autism Society Alberta, Autism Calgary, Autism Society of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Chinook Autism Society and Peace Autism Society.

Tips for successful advocacy

- Make sure your communication (letters, emails, meetings, etc.) has a clear goal.
- Negotiate as it is an essential part of the advocacy process.
- Remain open minded to consider alternative solutions or a possible compromise.
- Invite another person (friend or family) to school meetings for an alternative point of view or to catch things that you might miss.
- Focus on issues and not on personalities
- Be persistent- do not give up at the first sign of opposition.
- Listen carefully to what the others are saying.
- Give and listen for effective feedback.
- Acknowledge points of agreement.
- Plan and prepare-establish a strategy based on definite goals.
- Follow up conversations and meetings with an email summary to clarify agreed actions of both parents and school staff.
- Keep records for easy reference.
- Do not blame and do not get angry.

Be knowledgeable about Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Understand your child's strengths and areas of need.
- What are your child's emotional, intellectual, social and physical needs?
- What kind of supports, accommodations, and services does your child need to participate in school?

Be knowledgeable about your school board to advocate effectively

- Go online to access your school board's special education plans, including programs, services, policies and procedures.
- What kind of placements, programs and support services are available to your child in your school board?
- Talk to other parents of diverse learners. You may learn of services the school board has not told you about.
- Find out your school board's guidelines for assigning educational assistants to students.
- What community services and support groups are available to your child? How can these be accessed?

Every school board in Alberta has been given independence designing their own re-entry plan for students. Familiarize yourself with the details of your school board's specific plan so that you are well-informed to advocate for your child's needs.

Understand school board and education policy

Ensure that you are always aware of current legislation and policy surrounding diverse learning and COVID-19 educational policy.

- [Standards for Special Education](#)
- [Alberta School Re-entry Plan](#)

Ensure that you are always aware of current legislation and policy surrounding diverse learning and COVID-19 educational policy. These are updated often.

Questions for parent advocates to ask in times of COVID-19 for students considering a return to school:

- What accommodations will be made to ensure my child has access to necessary sensory breaks, movement breaks and clean and hygienic sensory equipment?
- What strategies will be used to explicitly teach my child about social distancing (i.e., are there arrows to show directions to walk? Are there lines down the middle of the hallway? Will the school consider a reasonable adjustment to allow my child to leave class earlier?)
- What is the school's COVID-19 policy regarding personal care assistance (i.e., if my child has particular toileting needs, will they have priority when visiting the washroom?)
- What is the school's mask exemption policy?
- For students requiring modifications to health guidelines, how will the school promote acceptance by staff and peers?
- How many children will be in my child's class? How will seating be arranged? My child may benefit from having a particular spot in the classroom (close to the door, teacher, window, etc.). Can this be accommodated?
- What will staffing look like in my child's class (teacher, aids, inclusive learning team, etc.)?
- What will my child's daily routine look like (staggered entry, recess, lunches, etc.)?
- If my child is ill or needs to self-isolate, how will learning continue while they are away?
- If conditions in my area worsen and a partial lockdown happens, how will learning continue?

This is not an exhaustive list of questions, nor will every question on this list be applicable to your child's situation.

Questions for parent advocates to ask in times of COVID-19 for students considering home-based learning

- Is your home-based learning program exclusively online or is there a paper option?
- How will my child access individualized teacher support, aide support or the support of the inclusive learning team online?
- My child does not engage well online but I still need/want to keep my child at home. How will my child access individualized teacher support, aide support or the support of the inclusive learning team while learning at home?
- What planned opportunities are there to transition from home- based to school- based learning or vice versa throughout the school year?

This is not an exhaustive list of questions, nor will every question on this list be applicable to your child's situation.

If your school board's home- based learning program does not meet your expectations, consider exploring options through an alternate home school board:

[Alberta Homeschooling Association](#)



Writing letters and emails

Letters and emails sent between you and the school are an important part of the documentation. Having things in writing establishes a "paper trail." This paper trail will be valuable in demonstrating how you have worked with the school or the school board to find solutions to your concerns. Letters and emails can illustrate how you have worked with the school to resolve concerns and who you have contacted within the school.

Strategies for successful letter-writing

Make a point of your letter clear. You are doing one or more of the following:

- requesting information
- requesting action
- declining a request from the school board
- providing information

If you are experiencing difficulties communicating with your school about COVID-related concerns, please feel free to use this template:

Dear _____,

Thank you for all the work you have done for my family during the time that my child has attended your school. We are incredibly grateful to have such a wonderful team working with and supporting us during these unprecedented times.

Like many other families, we have questions and concerns surrounding our child's return to school this upcoming fall. As it stands, the information we have received regarding what school will look like for diverse learners this upcoming term has, unfortunately, not been comprehensive enough for us to make any concrete decisions. Before we can begin to make plans regarding **(child's name)**'s plan for September, we would appreciate more information regarding the following:

Issue 1

Issue 2

Issue 3

Again, we are immensely grateful for the work your team has done with **(child's name)** and our family and look forward to further discussions that will ensure a smooth re-entry for our child.

Warmest,
(Name)

For further information regarding effective advocacy, please refer to the following documents:

<https://nbacl.nb.ca/module-pages/tips-for-being-an-effective-advocate/>

<https://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/policy/memberadvocacy/advocacy-tools/communicate-effectively.html>

<https://connectability.ca/2018/04/23/successful-advocacy/>

