

The background of the top half of the page is a grayscale photograph of a young child with a backpack, seen from behind, holding the hand of an adult. The child is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark backpack. The adult is wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

navigating

the education system when your child has mental health challenges

School can be very challenging for students facing mental health challenges. Focusing on successes and strengths and teasing out the stressors will be key to your child's success. In doing so parents and schools will help children build resilience, and ultimately, to flourish. Students do best when schools and parents work together.

This guide will help you understand the process, how to navigate the education system, and provide some essential skills for parents. Our goal will be to create a plan that both reduces challenges and maximizes opportunities for your child to use their strengths.

The Right to an Education

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 publicly funded schools are obliged under this law to take the measures needed to reasonably accommodate the special requirements of your child¹, regardless of the language of the instruction.

The Education Act provides for special education services to all students in need, supported along a continuum of programs and services. This includes 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 Identification, Placement, and Review Committee process (IPRC) is currently the only process by which a student, if they qualify, can be identified under the Ministry of Education as “exceptional” and therefore becomes legally entitled to special education programs and/or special education services.

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.

Students do best when schools and parents work together.

The Process for Helping Schools Better Understand your Child’s Needs

The Individual Education Plan (IEP)

If your child is facing challenges at school, the starting point in this process is to request a meeting with your child’s teacher to review their progress. Your child’s teacher may have valuable insights into his or her strengths and learning needs. In turn, you can share your understanding of your child’s needs with the teacher. Together you may decide that your child needs extra support which could be provided in different ways, one of which could include the development of an IEP.

¹ Please note: the term “child” in this brochure should be read as meaning child and youth except where it’s clear that youth refers to secondary and post-secondary students.

The purpose of an IEP is to ensure that a student with challenges is able to access the curriculum.

The IEP is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services provided for a particular student. Included in this is a record of the particular accommodations, and/or modifications, and/or alternative programming essential to demonstrate his/her learning.

- In many ways the IEP is the centerpiece of special education in the school.
- The purpose of an IEP is to ensure that a student with challenges is able to *access the curriculum*.
- 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.
- As a parent, you have valuable information to guide this plan. You know what strategies have and have not worked in the past or outside of school hours – share what you know, you are a critical part of this team.
- Changes to the IEP require parent consultation.
- If you do not agree with the IEP, it is imperative that you make an appointment to discuss. It is important to note that some accommodations will be enacted by default even if a parent has refused to sign but not requested a meeting. Ignoring it will not make it go away.
- If you do not understand the IEP, you are not required to sign anything you do not understand. Ask for a meeting, and don’t hesitate to ask questions.
- 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.
- The IEP is a working document which is reviewed at every reporting period and can be adapted as necessary in consultation with parents.
- The school might suggest accommodations or modifications within the regular classroom such as a flexible timetable or a modified school day to best suit your child’s needs. E.g. 2 hours a day or only attending for certain subjects.
- The IEP is also an entry point for conversations about your child with staff.

The IEP is a working document which is revised at every reporting period and can be adapted as necessary in consultation with parents.

The Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC)

When an IEP or current services do not meet your child's needs, the IPRC is a legal Ministry of Education process to identify students such that they become entitled to special education programs and/or special education services.

The IPRC makes the IEP an enforceable document. Many interventions, including the development of an IEP, could be considered before going to an IPRC.

- The IPRC will determine whether the student *qualifies* to 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.
- It is important to note that you do not have to go through the IPRC for the school to create an IEP for your child.
- From a parent perspective, "the IPRC creates obligation for the school board to provide services- an IEP without an IPRC is just a promise of what we hope to do- it is not an obligation".
- As a parent, you have the right to activate this process by asking the school for an IPRC meeting. This is done in writing. It is helpful to be prepared with documentation which may include psychological assessments or additional documentation (i.e. speech assessments, previous report cards etc.).
- The goal of the IPRC is to assess whether your child is eligible to be identified as an exceptional learner under the Ministry of Education's definition of exceptional students, and to decide on the most appropriate placement and resources to address your child's strengths and needs as identified.
- As a parent 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 be involved in the IPRC meetings. Your school board has

a Parent Guide with information on Special Education processes, services and resources for their district. Feel free to ask for a copy of this guide.

- The IPRC is the only process that has a legal appeal mechanism should a parent disagree with staff.
- 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, behavioural consultants, mental health and addiction nurses, resource teachers, educational assistants, and special education practitioners.

The Appeal Process/Mediation

- If a parent disagrees with the identification and/or the placement, they have 15 days to request that the IPRC hold a second meeting to discuss any concerns. The IPRC then holds a second meeting to confirm the first decision or change the decision. If a parent is still not satisfied with the decision, they have another 15 days to file a notice of appeal to the Special Education Appeal Board (SEAB). It must contain what part of the IPRC decision they disagree with (identification and/or placement) and give reasons for the disagreement.
- The SEAB is a panel of 3 people who will review the IPRC decision. If you decide to launch an appeal, you will be asked to nominate an appeal board member almost immediately.
- The SEAB will review the information that is provided about the student's needs and provide a written statement of their recommendations to the school board. The school board will decide whether to accept or reject the recommendations and will notify parents and students over 16 of this decision.

Initiating some of these processes can be intimidating. You don't have to do it alone. We've been there, we get it, and we can help.

When Regular School Services Do Not Meet Your Child's Needs

When students with mental health challenges need more support than their own school or school board can offer, they can be considered for a Care and Treatment Program, previously known as Day Treatment or Section 23: a specialized classroom with additional mental health supports. They offer highly supported individual learning, for a limited timeframe and with the purpose of re-integrating the student into a regular classroom when appropriate. Care and Treatment Programs are classroom settings generally provided under Section 23 of the Education Act.

- In Ottawa, mental health agencies partner with the school boards (the McHugh Unit 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 process for accessing: In the Ottawa school boards, the principal of your child's school, in consultation with parents, prepares and submits the application for a Care and Treatment Program to Coordinated Access for presentation to the Coordinated Referral Committee. The Coordinated Referral Committee is the coordinating body between the educational and therapeutic partners. This committee includes child mental health professionals who determine how a student could benefit from a therapeutic classroom setting. Parents can ask the principal or member of the mental health team to initiate the process.
- Consent is required no matter where the request originates. Once the school submits this recommendation for review by Coordinated Access, the school board has no decision-making authority.
- The purpose of coordination is to ensure that educational and therapeutic partners work together in considering the child's needs.
- Each school board has its own process for determining which students are brought forward to Coordinated Access for placement in a therapeutic classroom.
- The IPRC committee cannot recommend a Care and Treatment Program. IPRC and the Care and Treatment Program are two separate processes.
- Psychological testing is required for the Coordinated Access and Referral process. This testing can be done by your child's psychologist, by the school board, or in some cases a family may choose to engage 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.
- The availability and process to access a specialized classroom setting varies by school board. For students attending school outside of Ottawa, it's best to contact your school board office for details, and hopefully the above information will be a useful guide for you.

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we get it
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Essential Skills for Parents- PLEO's Six P's of Effective School Advocacy

1) Partnership:

- As a parent, you possess uniquely valuable insight and information regarding your child. You are your child's best advocate and a critical part of your child's team.
- Effective parent advocates know the value of building respectful working relationships with the school team. Think of it like a garden: you can't always harvest, you need to tend as well.
- Work with your child's teacher to share information on your child's needs as well as on approaches that have worked for you at home.
- Using statements such as, "it is my right" can convey a combative tone that is counter-productive and may negatively impact your or your child's relationship with the school team. Understanding your rights is important, as is choosing language that reflects your desire for partnership.
- Attend all school meetings when your child's progress, needs, strengths, and future are being discussed. You want your voice and your insights regarding your child's needs present at the decision table.
- Be open to their ideas. Allow yourself time to think over school suggestions that take you by surprise before instinctively rejecting them. Give yourself 24 hours to think it over before responding.
- Be mindful of respecting your school team in conversations with your child, no matter how you feel. This will help your child develop important advocacy skills, including how to disagree respectfully.
- Gradually involve your child in the advocacy partnership as much and as early in the process as possible. This will prepare them to advocate for themselves in the later high school years. It can be helpful to have a goal of your child independently advocating for themselves, with your support, by age 16.

Effective parent advocates know the value of building respectful working relationships with the school team.

2) Prepared:

- Understand the basics of special education law and system pathways by visiting the Ministry of Education website.
- Start a binder of all the materials related to your child's education in chronological order including: assessment results, past IPRCs/IEPs, samples of school work for clarification, past report cards, etc. This will provide you with a one-stop-shop of anything you may need to reference in a meeting.
- Put all communication with the school in writing and keep a copy. Taking notes at school meetings is important and can later be summarized in an email to the staff members. Phone conversations can also be documented by taking notes and sending a summary email afterwards confirming the important points. These may be a valuable reference for you if needed. If it's not written down, it didn't exist.
- "Rehearse away your emotions³".
- Bring a support person with you to school meetings, and let your school know in advance. Their presence with you may offer moral support and reduce your stress. They can also help you by taking notes.

3) Polite:

- Treat others with respect in communication even if there are disagreements. Foul language or hostility only works against your situation.
- Arrive on time, or a bit early, for meetings. Never late.
- Attempt to solve problems at the lowest level possible first. Most day-to-day challenges can be solved with your child's teacher. However, never hesitate to appeal to a higher authority when necessary, using the chain of command. Teacher - Principal - Superintendent of your school/ Superintendent of Special Education - Trustee
- Remember to thank and acknowledge those who have helped either you or your child.

4) Professional:

- Keep your cool. It is in your family's best interest to keep emotions under control and strictly professional. This is the hardest thing to do but, arguably, the most important. We know this is an emotional process, and those emotions should be expressed, ideally before and after meetings with someone in your support network – including PLEO.
- "Help me to understand how we are going to support this student" is the tone that will be most productive for team meetings.

- Having a list of points you would like to have addressed at meetings will help to ensure that nothing is forgotten.
- Refer to current psych-assessments or diagnoses. It is not solely the parent's perspective that there are mental health challenges. It is corroborated with documentation by medical professionals.
- Refer to specific issues and successes accurately by date. This necessitates parents recording occurrences by date regarding the challenges and victories the child is experiencing.
- Ask for clarification if you are uncertain of a term or need help understanding what is being discussed. You are not the only one. You can only make informed decisions and contributions if you understand. It can also be helpful to write down what you thought you heard and ask for confirmation that what you have written is correct.

5) Persistent:

- Be consistent in your requests.
- Follow up at the end of meetings with clarity and confirmation of next steps as well as the name of the person responsible with following through with those next steps. If possible, confirm an approximate completion date.
- Follow up if next steps were not completed. Don't leave loose ends to linger in space. Around the time of expected service, check in on the status.

6) Perspective:

- Our kids are watching and learning, taking their lead from us as role models on how to advocate for themselves and to build, not burn bridges, which will be a critical lifelong skill for them.
- Be focused on your long-term vision: What is your goal for your child? What are your child's goals for themselves? E.g. to be a successful adult with a full-time job they enjoy? To have a job in science because she loves science? To be an independent adult and live on their own? Develop an image or a vision of your child that is reasonable and achievable. Every parent's vision for their child will be slightly different. Stay focused on this as the finish line and build your plan around that ultimate goal.
- Knowing the ultimate goal we have for our child helps us to be aware of which battles to fight and which are not critical. If we fight on every front, it lessens the effectiveness of our advocacy.
- Share your goal and your child's goal with the team so that everyone is aware and able to work towards this end. Market this vision. Sell it to others. Bring them onboard to help the child work towards and achieve this goal.

Right to Privacy

- When students experience mental health symptoms at school, it is crucial that their right to privacy be protected and they are treated with care and respect.
- The student's right to privacy will be best served by a parent understanding how best to share personal information with the school. Although school-based information (such as report cards, IEPs, etc.) must go into the Ontario Student Record (OSR), other kinds of information related to the student's mental health (such as assessments, 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's education supports are based on the best information, and in the spirit of a caring, inclusive, and respectful learning environment.

During Hospitalization

- When students are hospitalized for mental health treatment, they may engage in their studies for shortened periods of each day. The student's regular school will be contacted if consent by the parents or child is granted, and a hospital teacher will work with the student inside the hospital, when appropriate.
- It will help to foster collaboration if parents consider inviting school representatives or the Mental Health and Addictions Nurses (MHAN) to discharge planning meetings. Sharing the discharge plan with the school is always at the discretion of the parent or child over the age of 12, but when educational and therapeutic providers are well informed it can benefit everyone. However, should the parent or child refuse to share the discharge plan, school staff will do their best to support the student.
- 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. Social workers or Mental Health and Addiction Nurses can help prepare students for their return to school and help set up ongoing support. You can request their involvement through your mental health team, principal, or hospital discharge team, or call PLEO to find out options for you in your district.

Prolonged Absence from School

- If your child does not attend school, whether a diagnosis or not is in place, reach out to your local school. They have social workers and other professionals that will help to find the right resources to support your child for their education. There are more options than you might realize.
- Keep your family doctor up to date on the child's prolonged absence from school.

With appropriate support from parents, mental health providers, and the education system, students can resume their education at any time.

Alternative Schooling

- **Alternative Programs** provide students opportunities to meet Ministry expectations with flexibility to allow greater concentration in areas of their own interest and aptitudes, including a focus on experiential learning opportunities. Contact your local school board for details and to discuss the special needs of your child, and whether the program would be a good fit for their needs.
- **Secondary Alternate Programs** provide a learning environment for students to complete one course at a time. They offer flexible scheduling, workplace opportunities, smaller class sizes, and self-paced learning. In considering this option, make sure that program requirements are a realistic fit for your child. Contact your school board for more details.
- **Specialized Classroom Placements** are classrooms within your local school board that may be accessed only through the IPRC process. You can inquire at your IPRC meeting what the options are and if your child would qualify for placement in them.
- **Adult High Schools** are full-time high schools 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.
- **Online courses** are accessible and are fully accredited by the Ontario Ministry of Education, allowing students to receive high school credits. There may be a cost to access these courses. For more details on this option and to compare with your child's needs, contact PLEO.

- **Cooperative Education (Co-op)/Apprenticeship Program** provides students with the opportunity to earn high school credits through the completion of an unpaid or, sometimes, paid work placement. These programs are available through your local high school or online schools.
- **Private elementary and secondary schools** are available that specialize in learning disabilities and/or mental health. These schools are fee-for-service. Contact PLEO to discuss available options.
- **Homeschooling programs** are available with a variety of customizing options.

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 programs and requirements to access services.
- **Mature Student Status:** If a youth does not complete high school, and is aged 19 years or older, he/she has the option to apply for admission to a university or college as a mature student. Refer to the institutions of interest for more information on how to proceed.



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 can temporarily take a back seat. Pushing education when a child is unable to focus, or when other stressors are overwhelming, can be counterproductive. The good news is that, with appropriate support from parents, mental health providers, and the education system, students can resume their education at any time.


Additional Resources

- Your school board's website
- The Ontario Ministry of Education website - including a full description of Regulation 181/98 otherwise known as the Special Education Act
- Ottawa Children's Coordinated Access and Referral to Services
- Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario and Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton

notes:

You don't have to do this alone.

Contact us for more information or to discuss your particular situation.



**helping parents of
children facing mental
health challenges
find their way forward**

This information is offered from a Family Peer Support perspective - PLEO's collective family experience over the past twenty years and collaboration with health, education and social service providers. *It is not meant as a substitute for medical advice.*

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