



The Special Needs Advisory Committee

15

## Adapting Our Schools to Children with Special Needs

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*Note – The term “special needs student” refers to a student with a handicap or a student with a social maladjustment or a learning difficulty. The term is now widely accepted in the school network to identify this group of students. To lighten the text, we use the name Special Needs Advisory Committee and its acronym SNAC for the committee that the Education Act calls “the advisory committee on services for handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities.” Please be aware that in some school boards, the name of this committee has been further modified.*

*This information leaflet is published as part of the FCPPQ training program.*

*It is primarily intended for parent members of the Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC) and for anyone interested in becoming a member or who wants to learn about this school board committee's role and how it operates.*

## Resources

To obtain reference material and to find useful tools or competent resource persons, please contact the FCPPQ.

We offer :

- Advice;
- Information brochures;
- References;
- Training workshops.

Visit our web site [www.fcppq.qc.ca](http://www.fcppq.qc.ca) or contact your regional association through the Parents' Committee at your School Board

## Acknowledgments

Leaflet No. 15 “Adapting Our Schools to Children with Special Needs” is published as part of the training program of the Fédération des comités de parents de la province de Québec, 389 Boulevard Rochette, Beauport, Québec, G1C 1A4.

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The FCPPQ wishes to thank the people and groups who contributed to the preparation of this document.

Novembre 2002  
Dépôt légal – 2002  
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec  
ISBN 2-921357-58-5

## Living with a child who has special needs



Parents of a child with a handicap or of a child who is having difficulties at school experience a wide range of emotions when they take their child into the education milieu. Whatever the situation—the first day of school, the daily routine of going to school and coming home, the many meetings with teachers, specialists, school principals, and so on—the parents' experience, like that of the child, is all too often filled with sadness, frustration and trouble, not to mention doubt and guilt.

One parent in ten has a child who requires special attention at school. However, parents can find support at the school and take advantage of a number of services to overcome the difficulties and turn this into an experience for personal growth.

There are also places where parents can become involved in order to improve services to special needs students. The Special Needs Advisory Committee is one of these organizations.

## What do schools offer to special needs students?

In the last few decades, schools have come a long way in accommodating the special needs and school-related difficulties of students.

Movements such as universal access to education, the recognition of equal rights in the Canadian and Quebec charters, the social integration of people with handicaps, the current reform in education, and the increasing acceptance among educational agents of the need for concerted action, have seen to it that special needs students are no longer considered misfits, automatically confined to a cloistered existence. They are no longer said to suffer from a handicap or a problem—they are living with a difference. It is up to the school to adapt to them and not up to them to adapt to the school.

### A right to success

What is the first thing a school should offer? The right for all students to succeed. According to the Education Act as it was modified in the wake of the Estates General on Education held in 95-96:

*"In keeping with the principle of equality of opportunity, the mission of a school is to impart knowledge to students, foster their social development and give them qualifications, while enabling them to undertake and achieve success in a course of study." (Education Act, s. 36)*

Currently, Quebec's schools are called on to develop and implement Success Plans that are designed to ensure the academic success of the greatest possible number of, if not all, students.



In the cases with which this leaflet is particularly concerned, targeting success for everyone applies to the three components of the school's mission:

- To impart knowledge, meaning to allow special needs students to access the learnings set out in the programs of study and develop their full potential;
- To foster social development, meaning to see to it that special needs students are not marginalized but are well integrated in society;
- To give qualifications, meaning to offer all students the opportunity to engage in an activity that allows successful integration into the labour force or into active life. On this matter, academic and career counseling for special needs students deserves our particular attention.

### An Individualized Education Plan adapted to the needs of each student

Schools have a very broad mission. How will they ensure that every special needs student achieves academic success year after year? To reach this goal, the Education Act provides:

"In the case of a handicapped student or a student with a social maladjustment or a learning disability, the principal, with the assistance of the student's parents, of the staff providing services to the student, and of the student himself, unless the student is unable to do so, shall establish an individualized education plan adapted to the needs of the student. The plan must be consistent with the school board's policy concerning the organization of services for handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities and in keeping with the ability and needs of the student as evaluated by the school board before the student's placement and enrollment at the school.

The principal shall see to the implementation and periodical evaluation of the education plan and inform the student's parents on a regular basis." (*Education Act, s. 96(14)*)

In short, the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) becomes the general framework in which the services for the student are described, for example his placement, special measures for integrating him into the school, indications concerning his access to the programs of study that correspond to his ability, the professional services required, in fact, everything that will enable him to achieve his full potential, just like all the other students. Thanks to this common reference tool, everyone helping the special needs student can work together in the pursuit of common goals.

### Services tailored to individual needs

Everything affecting a special needs student must be organized on the basis of the individual evaluation of his needs and his ability, and this includes teaching, special education programs (Education Act, s. 85, 96, 15), transportation, daycare services, specialized services, and so on.

The school board must perform this evaluation before the student is placed and enrolled in the school, as stipulated in the Education Act and in the Ministère de l'Éducation Policy on Special Education.



Creating with  
the student  
a true learning  
community

The Education Act assigns school boards an important role in this area. Among other things, it provides that the boards must:

- Adapt the educational services provided to a handicapped student or a student with a social maladjustment or a learning disability according to the student's needs (*Education Act, s. 234*).
- Adopt a policy concerning the organization of educational services for such students (*Education Act, s. 235*).
- Establish an advisory committee on services for special needs students (*Education Act, s. 185*).

### Concerted action—it's indispensable

The current reform in education places the student at the centre of the learning process. For a special needs student, it is especially important that he be thought of as the main actor in his success.

The ministerial policy on special education<sup>1</sup> also takes the position that schools must welcome parents and support their participation in view of their essential role in the child's life and their knowledge about him. They must be there, in particular, when goals are being decided through the IEP and when they are implemented and evaluated.

This perspective is the foundation on which the Special Needs Advisory Committee is built.

## Why get involved in the SNAC?

The parents' role in the education of a special needs child is extremely demanding. It demands all of a father or mother's inner strength, with little or no respite.

Nevertheless, many parents find a way to become involved in the structures of participation, either at school or in various associations.

They can also find the inner resources to become involved with the SNAC.

### For my child and for all those who, like him, need special attention

The primary motivation that compels parents to become involved in this type of organization is, undoubtedly, concern for their child's development. It follows that they are in a good position to understand the feelings of other parents and of the children with special needs. They also realize the amount of energy required to work with these children.

1. Adapting Our Schools to the Needs of All Students – Policy on Special Education. Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001. Available in print or on the MEQ web site.



*Building an open society able to make the most of each person's differences.*

### To work with decision-makers

Participating on the SNAC gives parents the opportunity to work with decision-makers, to have a better understanding of the constraints they have to deal with, and to voice their opinions about the choices to be made with seemingly inadequate means.

### To continue adapting our schools

The progress made in the field of special education during the last few decades is quite phenomenal and is due, in large part, to the efforts of many parents, educators, and others working in the field whose concern is the success of special needs students.

Parents and other members of the committee are there to continue this effort to provide special education services that foster success for all.

## What is the SNAC?

### Composition (Education Act, s. 185, 186)

Every school board shall establish an advisory committee composed of:

- Parents of the students concerned, designated by the parents' committee;
- Representatives of the teachers, of the members of the non-teaching professional staff and of the members of the support staff, designated by the associations which represent them in their dealings with the school board and elected from among the persons who provide services to the students concerned;
- Representatives of bodies which provide services to handicapped students or to students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities, designated by the council of commissioners after consulting with those bodies;
- A school principal designated by the director general.

*Since the Act does not specify the length of a member's term of office, the Fédération des comités de parents believes that it is up to each group appointing members to the SNAC to determine the duration of their service.*

The director general or his representative takes part in the sittings of the committee, but is not entitled to vote.

The council of commissioners determines the number of representatives from each group.

The representatives of the parents must constitute the majority of the members of the committee; consequently, there should be a minimum of seven parents' representatives.



## Appointing parents

The Parents' Committee, an advisory body at the school board level, is composed of one parent representative from each school and one representative of the Special Needs Advisory Committee. The Act gives the Parents' Committee the responsibility of appointing all parent members of the SNAC.

The Parents' Committee also determines the length of the SNAC parent delegate's term of office, preferably one year, since Parents' Committee members themselves have a one-year term of office. The committee can make provisions for substitute representatives and renewal of the terms of office to ensure the revitalization and continuity of the committee.

It is essential that the Parents' Committee establish criteria for appointing these representatives. It might consider criteria promoting the representation of parents of different categories of students, an equitable distribution between parents of students at the secondary level and parents of students at the elementary level, an equitable distribution between parents of students integrated into regular classes and parents of students in special classes or in special schools, and so on.

The Parents' Committee may make an arrangement with the school board and the outgoing committee about election procedures such as the letter calling for candidates, the notice of meeting, and so on.

In view of the personal data included in this type of notice or call for candidates, the principal of each school becomes the liaison between the Parents' Committee and the parents concerned.

Finally, the Parents' Committee must do everything it can to see that this committee is up and running as early as possible at the start of the school year. It is not necessary to wait until the new Parents' Committee is formed in October to appoint parents; it is even preferable to make plans for this at the end of the previous school year.

## Functions and powers of the committee



The harmonious integration of a student into a regular class or group and into school activities must be ensured "if it has been established on the basis of the evaluation of the student's abilities and needs that such integration would facilitate the student's learning and social integration and would not impose an excessive constraint or significantly undermine the rights or [sic] the other students." (*Education Act, s. 235*)

Section 187 of the Education Act is the main source of guidelines concerning the functions of the Special Needs Advisory Committee.

"The functions of the advisory committee on services for handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities are

1. to advise the school board on a policy for the organization of educational services to handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities;
2. to advise the school board on the allocation of financial resources to the services intended for those students.

The committee may also advise the school board on the implementation of an individualized education plan for a handicapped student or a student with social maladjustments or learning disabilities."

### Policy for the organization of educational services to Special Needs Students (Education Act, s. 187(1))

First, the Act indicates that the committee's function is to "advise the school board on a policy for the organization of educational services to handicapped students and students with social maladjustments or learning disabilities".

As we mentioned earlier, the school board must have a policy on special education in conformity with the Act and the rules and regulations governing it.

Section 235 of the Act is an important reference for the work of the SNAC. It establishes that the policy must ensure the harmonious integration of special needs students.

This same section of the Act then indicates that this policy shall include the following:

1. Procedures for evaluating special needs students;
2. Methods for integrating those students into regular classes or groups and into regular school activities;
3. Terms and conditions for grouping those students in specialized schools, classes or groups;
4. Methods for preparing and evaluating the individualized education plans intended for such students.

This policy is not limited by these suggestions and may draw inspiration from new lines of action identified in the ministerial policy on special education, particularly the concern for early detection and rapid intervention, the clear trend toward integration in the most natural setting possible, and so on<sup>2</sup>.

The committee may at any time ask for a revision of this policy to monitor the development of services for special needs students.

2. Adapting Our Schools to the Needs of All Students – Policy on Special Education. Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 2001. Available in print or on the MEQ web site.



### Allocation of financial resources (Education Act, s. 187(2))

The second function provided for in the Act gives the committee the power to “advise the school board on the allocation of financial resources to the services intended for those students.”

This is an important task for the committee since it encompasses everything that is done in special education.

It is the school board’s responsibility to explain the organization of these services so the committee can offer informed advice.

#### About funding...

Yes, the funding of special education services is a complex issue. It is important for the committee to know that the school board does not receive an allocation for each student who is experiencing difficulties or who has an impairment. Rather, the board receives a lump sum from the Minister based mainly on a statement of the services provided to students in a given year. This statement serves as an administrative reference. These allocations, including those for at-risk students, also take into consideration the provisions of teachers’ collective agreement on student/teacher ratios.

The school board is responsible for distributing this lump sum based on the needs of the current year. In other words, the school board must see that it meets all the needs with the funds at its disposal.

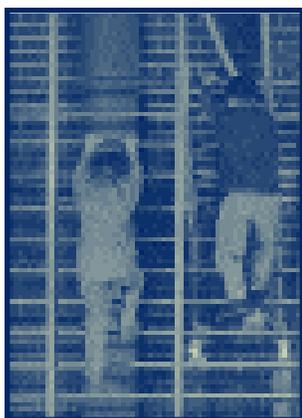
Given this context, the committee may take a look at the annual allocations that the board receives, but its chief concern is how the board plans to spend the money. This is the issue on which the committee must offer judicious advice to the school board.

### The Individualized Education Plan (Education Act, s. 187)

The Act also makes provision for the committee to “advise the school board on the implementation of an individualized education plan for a handicapped student or a student with social maladjustments or learning disabilities”.

A parent who is not satisfied with the way his child’s IEP is implemented may come to the Special Needs Advisory Committee for an opinion, which the SNAC will forward to the school board.

This is a delicate matter. On one hand, the committee must ensure the confidentiality of the personal information in its possession and on the other hand, the committee must intervene if, to its knowledge, the conditions set out in a student’s IEP are not being met.



### Agreements for services (Education Act, s. 213)

In section 213, the Act gives the SNAC another function having to do with agreements for services.

A school board may choose to use services offered by another school board or another body to more adequately meet a student's needs. This usually involves very specialized services that cannot be offered by the school board itself.

In this case, the school board must enter into a prior agreement with the school board or body in question. If this agreement concerns a special needs student, the board must consult the parents as well as the SNAC before entering into such an agreement.

### Exemption from compulsory school attendance (Education Act, s. 15(2))

The Education Act provides that the school board may, in certain cases, exempt a student from school attendance.

Among other reasons, the board may excuse a student at the request of his parents "by reason of a physical or mental handicap which prevents him from attending school". However, the SNAC must be consulted beforehand.

### In addition

The functions laid down in the Act establish the judicial framework in which the SNAC should work. They are broad enough to allow the committee to deal with the various aspects of special education.

Within the bounds of this framework, the committee can step in to see that the school board takes action on matters within its jurisdiction.

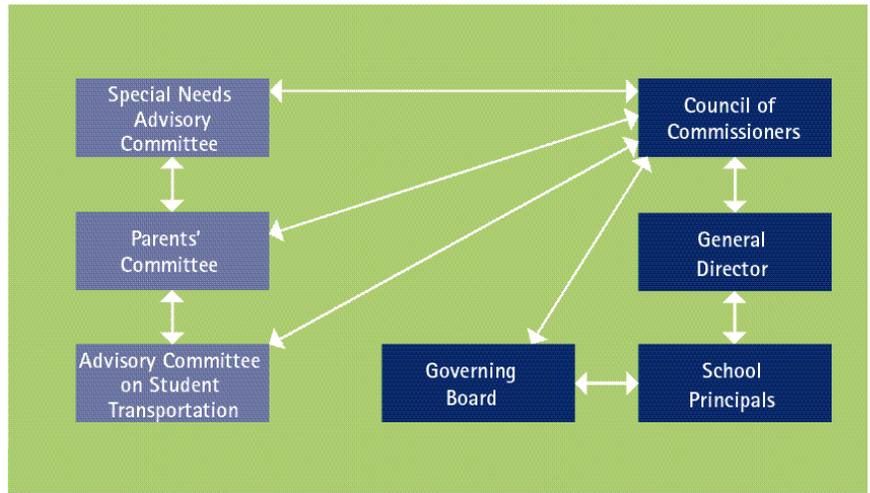
For example, the SNAC might insist on the importance of informing parents of the services offered and making them aware of the day-to-day life of special needs students. This task of sharing information and raising awareness might target various groups such as the Parents' Committee, governing boards, the Council of Commissioners, school board personnel, students, local media, and so on. The special education policy could include elements such as these.

To accomplish its work, the SNAC must possess all the necessary information concerning school board services. Thus, from time to time, professionals in the education field might be asked to explain their day-to-day work, or local organizations that provide support to parents might demonstrate the services they offer to the community.

## The place of the SNAC within the school board

There are a variety of advisory committees and decision-making bodies within the school board. The organizational chart below shows the different paths that SNAC parents can take to work with decision-makers. It should be noted that the SNAC gives advice directly to the school board. Parent members of the SNAC may also make their needs known through the Parents' Committee (*Education Act, s. 192*).

Lines of communication among the organizations



## How does it all work?

### Number of meetings

The Education Act establishes as the first rule of internal procedure that the SNAC must hold at least three meetings per the school year (The original text in French does not specify whether this means the civil year or the school year). However, experience shows that this is rarely enough for the committee to be truly effective. Often, several other meetings are added to a schedule that extends over a period of twelve months from when the committee is set up.

In some regions, it is difficult to increase the number of meetings. For this reason, or to allow members to participate to the fullest extent, the Act allows SNAC members not in attendance to take part and to vote by any appropriate means of communication.

Section 195 states that this means must allow all the participants to communicate with each other.

### Location of meetings

The Special Needs Advisory Committee may hold its meetings on school board premises. An agreement to this effect can be made with the Director General or his representative (*Education Act, s. 194*).



### Use of services

Administrative support services and school board facilities are made available free of charge to the SNAC. A prior agreement with the Director General is needed to establish the terms and conditions of use. Administrative support refers to the work usually done by support staff (secretarial, accounting, supplies, maintenance, and so on). Facilities include the material needed to perform committee tasks and to hold the meetings (Education Act, s. 194).

### Funding

The school board allocates the financial resources needed for the operation of the committee (Education Act, s. 197). These resources are recorded in the school board's budget and vary from board to board. The amount is determined on the basis of various criteria, notably the amount of administrative support provided by the school board. Specific factors must also be taken into account, such as transportation costs, daycare costs, and any other costs that allow an equitable representation of parents and other committee members in a given community.

The committee may also have its own revenues. Of course the operating budget must maintain a balance between expenditures and revenues. The committee manages its own budget, although the accounting can be done by the school board's administrative services. Even there, a prior agreement is essential. The SNAC is responsible for its finances and must give an account of its budget administration to the school board.

### Exercising functions and immunity

The law provides that committee members "must act within the scope of the functions and powers conferred on them, and exercise the care, prudence and diligence that a reasonable person would exercise in similar circumstances; they must also act with honesty and loyalty and in the interest of the school board and the population served by the school board" (*Education Act, s. 177(1)*). In return, the law stipulates, "no committee member may be prosecuted for an act performed in good faith in the discharge of his functions" (*Education Act, s. 196*). The law goes so far as to say the school board shall assume the defence of any committee member who is prosecuted for an act done in the exercise of committee functions.

### Rules of internal procedure

Section 195 of the Act entrusts the committee with the task of establishing its own rules of internal procedure. It would be to the committee's advantage to establish rules concerning matters that include but are not limited to the following:

- Choosing a Chair and his term of office
- Functions of the Chair
- Substituting for the Chair in his absence
- Quorum
- Adopting resolutions
- Conducting the meetings
- Location and time of meetings
- Choosing a secretary and defining his functions
- Public or private meetings
- Participation of other persons in the discussions



## Focusing on people...

### First, the students concerned

The work of the SNAC inevitably leads to a discussion of the different categories of students<sup>3</sup> for whom the special education services are intended. The committee even is responsible for advising the school board on the distribution of resources among these students who have such very different needs.

These students are usually grouped in the following way:

#### Students with social maladjustments or learning difficulties

This group includes the students termed "at risk" since they exhibit characteristics that predict the risk of academic failure, including the following:

- They experience difficulties that may lead to failure.
- They exhibit learning delays.
- They have emotional disorders.
- They have behavioural disorders.
- They have a developmental delay or mild intellectual impairment.

#### Students with severe behavioural disorders

#### Students with handicaps.

Students with handicaps present one or more of the following characteristics:

- Mild motor or organic impairment
- Language disorder
- Moderate to severe intellectual impairment
- Profound intellectual impairment
- Severe developmental disorder

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3. A more complete description can be found on the MEQ web site in the document "Students with Handicaps, social Maladjustments or Learning Difficulties: Definitions", MEQ, 19-6505A. A print version is also available.



### Parent members of the SNAC

Parent members of the Special Needs Advisory Committee have specific responsibilities including the following:

- To effectively represent all parents of special needs students
- To reflect the parents' vision
- To establish ties with parents of other structures of participation
- To question the services offered to children
- To deal with all the functions assigned to the committee
- To appoint from among its members a representative (and a substitute) to the Parents' Committee

### The representative to the Parents' Committee

The Act provides that one parent from the Special Needs Advisory Committee sits on the Parents' Committee. This type of link clearly promotes concerted action among all the parents before they relay their advice to the school board.

The specific role of the representative to the Parents' Committee can be described as follows:

- To make other parents aware of the day-to-day lives of children with special needs
- To provide follow-ups between the SNAC and the Parents' Committee
- To be adamant that the parent members of governing boards deal with special education
- To ensure that parent commissioners have a good understanding of special education and can make judicious interventions at the appropriate moment

### ...and all those who are involved in supporting special needs students

The people who work with special needs students on a daily basis are usually there by personal choice. Their work is demanding, but in return it often brings gratifying rewards.

There are also the many people who come into contact with integrated students, from the regular teaching staff to the daycare and supervisory staff as well as the administrative and support staff of the schools. All these people have to be given the necessary preparation and support. The SNAC must devote special attention to ensuring that these people are able to follow school board policy guidelines in an appropriate manner with each student.

In varying degrees, their contribution to the development of special education services is indisputable. Ultimately, they are the ones who lend a personal note to these services.

## In a spirit of partnership



The SNAC must develop in a spirit of partnership.

But what is a partner?

Primarily, it is someone who, though similar to us, seems different because of his culture, his experiences, and sometimes even his motivations.

The idea of forming an advisory committee with a variety of partners, who by definition are different, draws attention to the strengths of these differences. The ultimate goal of this type of committee, whose contributions are linked to the distinctive features of each member, is to improve the day-to-day life of students who have a recognized difference.

If partnership is necessary within the committee, it is just as important in relations with the school board and the school. An organization that consults a group of people must be able to listen and react in a satisfactory manner to the proposals it receives.

Members of the advisory committee possess a power to influence that goes hand in hand with the quality of the relations they form with parents and the various school board organizations.

Being in the majority on the SNAC, parents hold significant influential power. They also have responsibilities related to this power, notably to become well informed and to be attentive to the diverse situations that are liable to arise.

Leaflet 5 "Fullfledged Partners", published by the Fédération des comités de parents, reminds us that to work effectively, a committee composed of partners must rely on the following elements:

- Accepting others
- Exercising care in one's communications
- Having confidence in the group
- Having the desire to succeed
- Overcoming difficulties and solving the inevitable conflicts
- Seeking consensus
- Showing solidarity

Every school board has an advisory committee on services for students with special needs, usually called the Special Needs Advisory Committee.

This committee is composed of a majority of parents, along with school staff members, representatives of outside organizations, and the Director General of the school board or his representative.

The committee's mandate is to advise the school board on services to special needs students. Several questions may be addressed, including the following:

How can difficulties be prevented?

What can be done to detect the handicap or the difficulty as quickly as possible?

Can we increase a certain special education service?

Where can we find the service that best meets the needs of a certain group?

Are all the resources being well used?

What is the school board's role in ensuring that the educational project of each school contains provisions related to special education?

Are the children who attend daycare well integrated?

Do the relations among the students at both the elementary and the secondary level foster the integration of special needs students?

How can we make these services better known and encourage more parent involvement?

Produced by the Fédération des comités de parents, this information leaflet is primarily addressed to parent members of the Special Needs Advisory Committee (SNAC) and to anyone interested in becoming a member or who wishes to learn about this school board committee's role and how it operates.

