

E. Focus Group Parents: Summary



Focus Groups on Inclusive Education

Qualitative Research Study

Summary Report

February 2018

Prepared by:



On March 24, 2017 the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development created a Commission on Inclusive Education (the Commission), as an arms-length body mandated to examine the model of inclusive education within the Province. As part of its examination, the Commission is undertaking a multi-phased research initiative that involves literature reviews (including an examination of best practices from across the Country), consultation with its partners in inclusive education, as well as public consultation.

As part of its initial public consultation, the Commission conducted a series of public workshops, an online survey with various stakeholders (i.e., educators, parents, students and interested Nova Scotians), and collected personal stories from stakeholders.

In order to further explore and better understand perceptions and opinions of inclusive education among parents, the Commission hired Corporate Research Associates Inc. (CRA) to undertake qualitative research with parents of school-aged children across Nova Scotia, including both parents of children **with** exceptionalities and parents of children **without** exceptionalities. Ultimately, these results will be used to further aid the Commission in the development of its strategic plan that will include recommended changes related to policy, funding, resources, teacher training (initial preparation and ongoing professional development), coordination and alignment of programs and services, monitoring of inclusive education, and accountability.

The following report presents a summary of results from the qualitative group discussions. This report includes: methodological details of the project, an executive summary of results, key direction for consideration and a detailed analysis of results. Appended to this report is a copy of the recruitment screener, and moderator's guide.

Research Methodology

To meet project objectives, a qualitative research approach was undertaken. More specifically, a series of in-person focus groups and online groups using CRA's Netfocus technology (real-time, simultaneous phone and online discussions) were conducted with parents of school-aged children from across the Province, including both parents of children with exceptionalities, and parents of children without exceptionalities. Note, due to lower than anticipated shows in a few groups, CRA conducted four additional in-depth, telephone interviews with parents of children with exceptionalities. Across all sessions and interviews, a total of **82 parents** took part in this study. The following provides further details on the research methodologies employed.

Qualitative Research: Traditional, In-Person Focus Groups & Netfocus Groups



12 Groups in total:

- **7 groups** with parents of children with exceptionalities
 - 2 in-person (1 in Halifax, 1 in Sydney)
 - 5 Netfocus (mix of locations across NS)
- **5 groups** with parents of children without exceptionalities
 - 2 in-person (1 in Halifax, 1 in Sydney)
 - 5 Netfocus (mix of locations across NS)
- **4 phone, in-depth interviews** with parents of children with exceptionalities



- Discussions conducted January 22-25, 2017
- Each in-person group lasted up to 2 hours, while each Netfocus group lasted up to 1.5 hours
- Incentive: \$75 to each in-person participant and \$65 to each Netfocus participant

- Participants were randomly recruited from the general population (with referrals for parents of children with exceptionalities)

Context of Qualitative Research: *Qualitative research is intended as moderator-directed, informal, non-threatening discussions with participants whose characteristics, habits and attitudes are considered relevant to the topic of discussion. This type of discussion allows for flexibility in exploring all areas that may be pertinent to the investigation. Qualitative techniques are used in marketing research as a means of developing insight and direction, rather than collecting quantitatively precise data or absolute measures. As such, results cannot be applied to the overall population under study, and must be used as directional insight only.*

**Executive Summary
& Direction**

Overall Perceptions of
Current Model

Children with
Exceptionalities

Looking Forward

Executive Summary

Results of the **2018 Focus Groups on Inclusive Education** underscore the perceived need and desire for improved policy, programming and resources specifically aimed at inclusion and meeting the needs of children with exceptionalities. Across the province, parents generally see value in the concept of inclusivity and strongly endorse efforts to ensure classrooms are as inclusive as possible. That said, the current model falls well short of meeting the needs of children with and without exceptionalities, with a wide-range of concerns being expressed. Indeed, when asked to assign the education system a letter grade in terms of its performance in relation to inclusivity, parents offer mediocre assessments, with clear opportunities for improvement.

Overall, the term ‘inclusive education’ is generally understood, and parents recognize the benefit inclusivity has in creating a more accepting and understanding society. That said, some parents, particularly those with children *without* exceptionalities, express a clear desire for additional education concerning the benefits and challenges of inclusivity, what role parents (and children) play in the process, and how to best talk to children about inclusivity.

When considering the primary benefits of an inclusive education model, parents readily recognize the significant impact exposure to inclusivity provides to children, helping to build a more accepting and understanding society overall. Moreover, many parents of children *with* exceptionalities highlight the excellent work of some great educators and support staff, and the dramatic impact inclusive education has had on their child’s academic and social progress. That said, parents believe the quality of education provided varies notably across school boards, schools, and by teacher.

While the current inclusive education model is deemed well-intentioned, across audiences, parents feel that the system falls short in a number of critical areas, with a lack of funding perceived as a core underlying issue. Across groups, the system received the greatest criticism with regards to large class sizes, and a lack of sufficient resources available, both in terms of staff (i.e., teachers, EPAs/TAs, learning experts, and administrative staff), and adaptive equipment or technologies. Moreover, across the province parents were critical of the fact that specific training is lacking for teachers and support staff on how to deal with exceptionalities in the classroom. Parents harshly criticized the system for having no apparent standards in place in terms of maximum number of children with exceptionalities in a classroom. Further, many parents of children with exceptionalities consider communication a notable issue, and generally view their relationship with the school system as an adversarial one where they are forced to be aggressive, defensive and often their child’s lone advocate. Other key criticisms of the system include long wait lists for assessments, high EPA/TA turnover, and lack of accountability and follow-through in terms of ensuring adaptations and IPPs are properly implemented.

Interestingly, when shared recent facts concerning Nova Scotia’s inclusive education model, across groups parents were actually surprised by the apparent low number of complex cases, as their perception is that challenges are far more prevalent in a system that is quick to label children with a diagnosis. Further, parents of children without exceptionalities attributed poor overall student performance in relation to math and literacy to an insufficient focus on education (i.e. teachers are focusing on other issues in the classroom) and having funding directed in non-education areas to deal those with exceptionalities.

Executive Summary (cont.)

As mentioned, parents recognize the importance and value of inclusivity, but believe the current model does not adequately meet the educational needs of anyone involved. While parents are cautiously optimistic regarding the future and potential changes that may result from the Commission's recommendations, parents also appreciate the innate challenges and sensitivities that will be associated with any such major adjustment, and recognize that there is no easy or quick fix solution.

When asked for specific suggestions as to changes they would like to see in the inclusive education model, parents offered a wide-range of suggestions, with priority being given to:

- The implementation of consistent standards across schools and regions in the province (regarding staffing: student ratios; firm ratios of students with and without exceptionalities (or IPPs) in a classroom; and ratios of students: EPAs / TAs);
- A reduction of class size (particularly in classes with a higher prevalence of students with exceptionalities);
- Equitable distribution of adaptive equipment across schools and regions;
- Establish minimum education and/or experience requirements for EPA/TA positions (ensuring EPAs/TAs have the necessary knowledge and experience required to successfully fulfill their role);
- Elevating EPA/TA role in the classroom to provide additional assistance to other children (when possible) who may or may not have a diagnosed exceptionality, but may benefit from more one-on-one assistance;
- Provide increased inclusive education training opportunities to teachers (e.g., professional development courses on relevant topic areas);
- Examine ways to minimize administrative work for teachers and specialists;
- Examine ways to shorten student wait times for assessments to allow for earlier diagnosis and intervention;
- Focus more on individual assessment results, whereby the level of inclusion may vary based on a child's individual abilities and situation, with input from parents and students; and
- Explore opportunities to increase communication between parents and schools.

As the Commission for Inclusive Education moves forward with the development of its strategic plan, including recommended changes for Nova Scotia's model of inclusive education, findings of this research suggest that consideration should be given to the following:

- 1. Standards:** There is a need for the implementation of consistent standards across schools and regions in Nova Scotia regarding staff and student ratios relating to inclusive education. Most notably, such standards should clearly outline acceptable ratios in terms of number of students with exceptionalities (including IPPs) in a classroom (maximum acceptable threshold), and the number / ratio of EPAs/TAs required when students with exceptionalities are in the classroom. Similarly, standards must consider a reduction of class sizes when a higher prevalence of students with exceptionalities is experienced.
- 2. Resource Allocation:** While staffing resources must be better aligned with the needs of a classroom, any plan must ensure equitable distribution of adaptive equipment across schools and regions. Further, alternative approaches to minimize administrative work for teachers and specialists should be considered to ensure both teachers and specialists are able to spend more quality time in the classroom.
- 3. Education / Training:** Inclusive education training should be mandatory for all teachers (e.g., professional development courses on relevant topic areas / prevalent exceptionalities, or course inclusion in initial teacher education training). Further, consideration should be given to establish minimum education and/or experience requirements for EPA/TA positions, ensuring EPAs/TAs have the necessary knowledge and experience required to successfully fulfill their role. Accordingly, the role of an EPA/TA should be elevated in the classroom to provide additional assistance to other students who may or may not have a diagnosed exceptionality, but may benefit from one-on-one assistance.
- 4. An Individualized Approach:** Consideration should be given to placing increased emphasis on individual assessment results, whereby the level of inclusion may vary based on a child's individual abilities and situation, with input from parents and students. Enhanced relationships with parents is fundamental to such success, as is shortened wait times for assessments to allow for earlier diagnosis and intervention.
- 5. Increased Communication:** Current communication levels between parents and schools related to inclusive education is lacking. There is a need to promote public awareness of diversity and inclusion within the school system, so all parents understand its intent, their role and what implications it may have on their children. Consideration should be given to providing parents with additional tools to support an inclusive education model (e.g., tips on how to speak to your child about inclusivity, suggested at-home resource list for those needing additional assistance). Further, there is clearly a need for increased communication with parents of children with exceptionalities, and consideration should be given to allowing parents to communicate directly to EPAs/TAs.

Executive Summary
& Direction

**Overall Perceptions of
Current Model**

Children with
Exceptionalities

Looking Forward

Inclusive Education

While the term ‘inclusive education’ is generally understood, parents of children without exceptionalities are often unsure as to its overall purpose and potential implications.

Groups began with the moderator providing a brief overview of the Commission of Inclusive Education, including details regarding the Commission’s mandate. Following this description, participants were asked to explain what ***inclusive education*** means to them, as well as what it might mean for their child.

Inclusive Education Defined:

The definition of ‘*inclusive education*’ is generally understood as having children with and without disabilities or special needs participating and learning together in the same class. Regardless of whether or not a parent has a child with exceptionalities, ‘inclusive education’ was considered to be a learning environment where all are welcome, and where no one is segregated by their learning abilities. Many parents described the current model as dramatically different from when they went to school, reminiscing of a time of segregation and discrimination by disabilities.

While there was general agreement on what inclusive education entails, parents of those ***without*** exceptionalities were consistently less clear of its overall purpose, the impact it may have on their child, and what role they (and their child) has in the process. This confusion was primarily driven by an apparent lack of communication on what the intent of inclusive education is, and what the anticipated implications of inclusive education are in the classroom.

Across locations, parents commonly noted that they have received little to no formal communication from their school regarding this topic. Further, parents of children without exceptionalities consistently mentioned that they have limited to no information when notable disruptive outbursts occur in the classroom. As such, parents typically learned about such incidents through their child, and were often at times unsure as to how to appropriately address the matter with their child.

Of note, many parents, regardless of whether or not they have children with or without exceptionalities expressed unfamiliarity with the term ‘*exceptionalities*’ and questioned if that was simply the current ‘politically correct term for disabilities or special needs.

Inclusive Education Defined



Quotable Mentions...

*“Education...that is designed to reach all the people in the class, rather than filtering the children so they fit the teaching...Looking at whoever is in that class and then teaching all those children, and including them and accommodating them no matter what their exceptionalities...” – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities***

*“The child is learning the same curriculum as the rest of the class but the method and the way they're being taught is a bit different that's suited to their needs.” – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities***

*“I think it's about making sure that ...no matter what their skill set is, [they] still have an opportunity to feel part of the group. With that comes challenges, but I think it's important that kids develop a sense of empathy for everybody, and I think that only happens when they have that exposure to broad spectrum of abilities...” – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities***

*“Looking at the individual child and supporting their learning needs, but doing it in the context of keeping them with their peers...every child can learn, and should have the opportunity to learn with their peers.” – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities***

*“Thinking it must mean - include the most amount of people you can, without excluding anyone.” – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities***

*“[An] eclectic group of kids learning in different ways and having needs met in the same room.” – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities***

*“I think the parents out there who don't have children with challenges maybe need to have a little education, as well to why it's important that our children are integrated with their children and what a great benefit it is. With our children, to make them feel included and so that other children can develop empathy and respect and inclusion. Sometimes I wish other parents at the school had a better appreciation of what we're going through.” – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities***

Impact of Inclusive Education

Students With Exceptionalities:

Overall, parents of children with exceptionalities generally agreed that the system provides their child with **important opportunities for social development** that may not otherwise happen under a segregated model. Parents appreciated the **sense of belonging**, and inclusion in a typical or 'normal' education setting. Further, regardless of location, parents of those with exceptionalities felt the current model of inclusive education helped to **remove the stigma** of having an exceptionality.



Quotable Mentions...

"What was beautiful to me right from the start was that he was just 'in', and he was accepted." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"I want it to mean [that all children are included]; that's the ideal definition, but there's various degrees...it completely depends on the school system [you're in], the people in place, resources." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"Being exposed to people who are all different. It's a microcosm of society at large; everyone is different." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"It's an absolutely wonderful idea. I don't think it should ever go back to the old system." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"[The school] should make parents feel welcomed...[There's] very little open communication...when I'm coming into the school, [teachers are often defensive, but they should think of] where I'm coming from; if this was you, you're not going to come in with a cool head....We don't start off as difficult parents. We've become bitter and harsh, and [have realized] that we have to be not so nice to get what we need for our children." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"...they're taking away the stigma [of exceptionalities], and they're allowing the kids to talk about it in an open environment." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

Impact of Inclusive Education

Students Without Exceptionalities :

Parents of children **without** exceptionalities also strongly endorsed the concept of inclusive education and consistently noted that the inclusive education model provided their children with opportunities to **learn more about diversity**. Consequently, it helped their children become more **understanding, compassionate and accepting** of differences in society and diversity in general.



Quotable Mentions...

“My boy doesn’t see differences in anybody...they’re all [his] peers. Children shouldn’t be outcasts just because they have a learning disability.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

That said, for many parents, the impact of inclusive education on their child **varied notably across schools**, with its impact being largely dependent upon the number of students with exceptionalities in any given class, the level of resources available within their school board/school, as well as their child’s age/grade-level. While some parents felt that inclusivity had a broadly positive impact on their child’s education, many felt that the model, in its current form, fell short of reaching their child’s academic needs, with teachers being unable to provide an appropriate level of individualized attention to all students, including those with exceptionalities.



Quotable Mentions...

“I wonder if my kids are getting a fair shake...[in my child’s previous school they had] 20 kids in the class, and 17 had IPPs...” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“They brought education down to teach everyone - brought quality level down.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

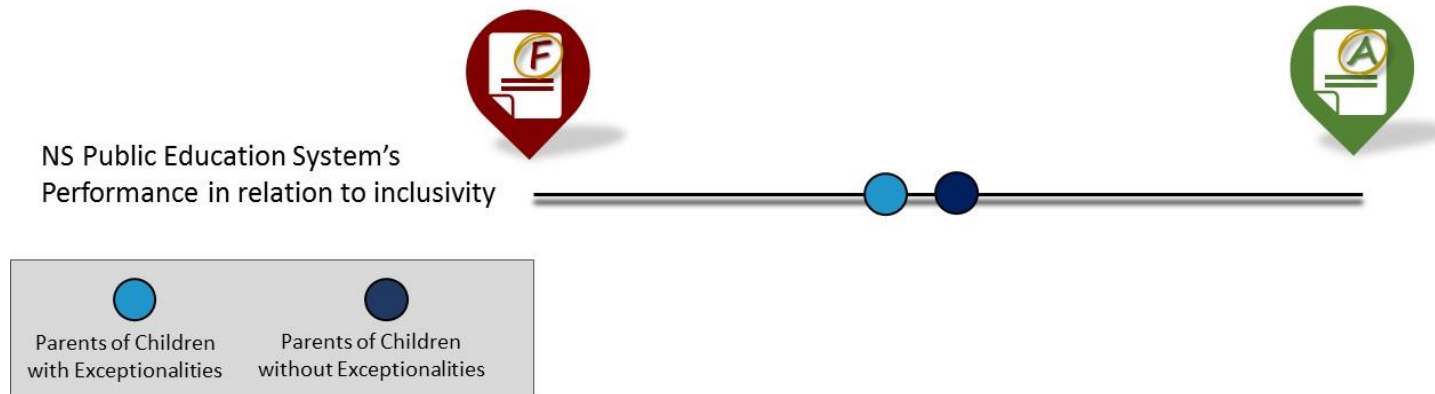
“The teachers are trying they're best and doing what they can, there's not enough help for all the kids with special needs. The ones who aren't struggling are getting lost too.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

Public Education System's Performance

While the concept of inclusive education is widely endorsed, the current model is perceived to fall well short of meeting everyone's needs.

Across audiences, there is general perception that the current model of inclusive education does not work, and falls well short of meeting the needs of all students. Indeed, numerous issues and challenges were consistently identified as being faced by all those involved and the current model was considered highly problematic, with clear opportunities for improvement. Across locations and audiences, parents **support and praise the concept in theory**, and recognize that it helps children become more understanding, accepting and embracing of diversity in the population. That said, parents of those both with and without exceptionalities believe significant changes to the system are required. When asked to assign a letter grade in terms of the public educational system's performance in relation to inclusivity, grades typically centered around C, with several parents (particularly those with children in junior/high school) giving grades of D. Few offered higher (A or B) or exceptionally lower (F) grades. When considering assigned 'grades' to the current model, it warrants mention that parents of those in lower elementary grades consistently offered higher grades (i.e. the limited As or Bs), regardless of whether or not they had a child with exceptionalities. Those most critical included those who had a longer tenure in the public education system, or alternatively, those with multiple children across grade levels.

Overall, as noted in the illustration below, parents of children without exceptionalities were only slightly more likely than parents of children with exceptionalities to give a higher grade score. Note, this visual is not intended to imply a reliable quantitative assessment of each audience's perceptions, but simply to demonstrate how grades varied across group audiences.



Reasons for Assigned Grades

Parents were asked to provide a justification for their letter grades. Overall, moderately-low grades were primarily attributed to six consistent factors including:

- **Insufficient class resources** (i.e., EPAs/TAs, equipment);
- **High teacher-student ratios;**
- **Large class sizes;**
- **Lack of teacher training on dealing with exceptionalities;**
- **Inclusion of too many exceptionalities in some classes;** and
- **Inconsistent delivery of inclusive education across classes, schools and school boards.**

It is important to note that criticisms were consistently applied to the system and its structure, rather than being a reflection of the skills and abilities of teachers and/or support staff. Indeed, many parents commented that they felt teachers and staff were doing the best they possibly could but with a lack of necessary resources, large class sizes, and unwieldy class makeups.

Interestingly, despite moderately-low scores across all regions, parents living outside of Halifax often felt that the system performed worse in rural communities compared to Halifax (i.e., that children with exceptionalities living in Halifax had greater access to resources and supports). That said, discussions suggest that issues are prevalent across the province, as those in Halifax were equally as critical of their access to resources and provision of inclusive education.

Quotable Mentions....



“C. I think the attempt and intent is to be better, BUT the resources are not present; social inclusivity is difficult and with extra large class sizes of 28-33; its impossible to have consistency and success.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“C. I don't have a lot of experience with this but I feel like we, as parents, as people in general, and the school system have a lot more to learn and figure out regarding inclusive education.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“D. Teachers don't have proper resources to properly deal with children who don't have typical needs. As a result, other students suffer. Teachers attention is divided, they are exhausted. Individual children with typical needs are not getting the engagement they should get for a great education. Teachers don't have qualifications to deal with children with mental issues, or with severe or moderate developmental needs.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“C. Not enough resources to meet the needs of the children, although in my experience my children have had positive experiences. But I do know that is not always the case with other children who have higher needs.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“F. My son is no longer included in regular education. He is segregated in a Spec. Ed. classroom and cannot go to regular classes because there are not enough EAs.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“C. No follow through with some of the suggestions for supports due to financial restraints of the board or individual schools.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“C...It's a barely passing standard...but it's not near as inclusive as it could be and it should be for children with exceptionalities...you could be on the brink of kids being in crisis because there simply isn't the right services or the right supports in place for children.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“D. Teachers do not have the time nor resources to educate every student in one classroom separately. Too many needs. The last thing done in the classroom is teaching. Teachers are not educated to educate the diverse needs our students have.” - Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“B. Not because I think that everything is all roses, I really think that the efforts teachers are putting into managing the various needs, challenges, personalities and varieties of exceptionalities, is notable. It's tough. One size doesn't fit all. I commend them for their effort.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

What Works in the Current Model?

The exposure inclusivity provides to children, creating a more accepting and understanding society, is clearly considered the primary benefit of the current model.

When considering what works in the current process, parents clearly consider the primary benefit to be the exposure inclusivity provides to children, creating a more accepting, and understanding society. Parents of those with exceptionalities highlighted the excellent work of some great individuals (teachers, EPAs/TAs), and the dramatic difference educators and support staff have made to their children's lives in terms of both academic and social development, through well developed and implemented adaptations or Individual Program Plans (IPPs).

Of note, several parents of children with exceptionalities offered particular praise of new teachers (i.e., those who have recently completed their teaching degree), as they felt that their education had better prepared them for teaching in an inclusive classroom by providing them with essential knowledge, tools and approaches for teaching those with exceptionalities.



“Children learning acceptance [is the greatest strength].” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“It’s being exposed to people who are all different. It’s a microcosm of society in large, everyone is different...” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“It’s been great for my child to have siblings to go to same school; [having another set of eyes at the school; an additional support].” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“[There’s a] commitment to inclusion; there is an openness from teachers and principals. If you say ‘there are things that aren’t quite working, can you address it because my kid isn’t included, isn’t learning’, there is [an effort to help support inclusion]” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“A lot of the young teachers are trying to teach in a more inclusive manner and they’re coming out of university able to interact with kids with exceptionalities in a positive way. They’ve had entire education and practicums where they’ve included this. For me, it’s been the younger teachers who have actually been willing to have the conversation about exceptionalities.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

Key Strengths of Current Model

Further, some identified **having siblings in the same school** as a key benefit of inclusivity, while a few also noted having **quality adaptive equipment** readily available, **Google Classroom**, and the **SchoolsPlus Program** as key strengths of the current model. The fact that **greater effort is being placed on conducting assessments** (albeit after notable time delays) was also seen as a clear benefit, allowing teachers to create adjusted, personalized learning plans, where appropriate.

In general, many parents believe that with proper supports in place, and properly trained educators, it is possible to have a fully inclusive model of education that successfully meets the needs of all children.

The box inset to the right provides a recap of the key 'strengths' or 'benefits' of the current model. Again, while overall reactions were generally consistent across audiences and regions, parents of children in the lower elementary grades generally expressed fewer criticisms of the model.



“As long as the adequate amount of support is there and the teachers are capable of supporting the multiple levels of learning, it doesn't impact anybody, but that's not always the case. It complicates things if they don't have the assistance.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

Key Strengths

- Exposure; greater acceptance / understanding of diversity
- Socialization/peer modeling; more opportunities for children with exceptionalities to build friendships / Peer modeling
- All students being able to benefit from additional resources and supportive techniques used
- Less restrictive learning environment for those with exceptionalities / more learning opportunities
- Google Classroom (for some)
- SchoolsPlus Program (for some)
- Learning Centre / Resource Centre for more one-on-one assistance (for some)
- Highly knowledgeable and skilled teachers and/or support staff (in many cases)
- Ability to incorporate Adaptations and IPPs
- Quality adaptive equipment readily available (for a few)
- Having children with exceptionalities go to the same school as their siblings
- More children being properly diagnosed compared to years ago

Areas in Need of Improvement

Parents recognize a wide-variety of areas where the current inclusive education model falls short.

Across audiences and regions, parents were highly critical of the current model of inclusivity. Indeed, when asked to identify areas where the current education process was not as strong, parents identified a wide-range of issues, based on both their personal experiences and what they had heard from other parents.

Overall, the system received the greatest criticism for **large class sizes** (limiting teachers' ability to adequately address all students' needs), **lack of standards** in terms of ratios of exceptionalities to non-exceptionalities, and a **lack of sufficient resources** both in terms of **staffing** (i.e., teachers, EPAs/TAs, learning experts, and administrative staff) and **adaptive equipment/technologies** to deal with the challenges associated with special needs' children. In multiple instances across locations parents cited where a majority of students in a given class have **Individualized Program Plans (IPPs)** in place, placing extraordinary and unacceptable demands on teaching staff. Parents were especially critical of the apparent **lack of standards and inconsistencies** applied across schools and school boards. Of note, many parents reported limited resources being available (with several parents across regions reporting having had to purchase adaptive tools/technologies out-of-pocket). That said, a few reported having no issue accessing supports and resources.



"Teachers have been saying to me – they don't have the support that they need from principals, the school board, definitely not from the provincial government...they're in crisis." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"The need doesn't seem to be taken very seriously. Every time there is a budget cut, we lose TAs. Their pay is abysmal. For what they're paid to do what they do, they're not doing it for the money." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"I think that the problem that I find is that there is lots of talk about inclusivity and I think that's fantastic; however, I think that a lot of that is still talk. I think there is an inconsistent message between what they want to do, and what is actually happening." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"My biggest beef with the whole thing is that it's not even...I think we benefit because we have all of these [resources to support inclusion] and other areas don't. Why do we have this and other places don't? There's something wrong with that." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"[My child's previous class had] 26 students in the class, 18 of whom had IPPs. [The teacher] had to make 18 special tests. That's absurd!" – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

Areas in Need of Improvement *(cont.)*

The system also received heavy criticism regarding the **level of communication**, particularly between parents and schools. Indeed, parents of children with exceptionalities expressed frustration with the level of information they received from teachers regarding their child's academic and social progress. Several of these parents felt that the communication they did receive was only focused on the negative (e.g., instances of behavioural issues), with little to no information on positive developments. Further, parents of children with exceptionalities often felt there was **insufficient communication and/or coordination within the school system itself**, both between principals and teachers, and teachers and EPAs/TAs. Many of these parents were frustrated with school policy preventing direct communication between parents and EPAs/TAs, as parents often felt teachers lacked detailed knowledge and awareness regarding their child's day-to-day activities. The inset box shown below provides a recap of various key weaknesses or areas for improvement discussed in this section of the report.



“TAs aren't being given all the reports coming in from specialists; they only get the information that the teacher deems appropriate...and I think sometimes you miss [information]...I think if [TAs are not] being given all the information, it's harder to make those decisions on what might work, and it's more trial and error. As a parent you're not even permitted to have a conversation with the TA...they can't speak to you about your child's day, they're not permitted to be in any meetings about the child they work with. To me I don't quite understand the process there. That's a huge loss for the TA and the teacher in the class to have a truer understanding of the child's [abilities].” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

Weaknesses

- Insufficient # of EPAs/TAs (i.e., availability; sharing of EPAs/TAs)
- High teacher-student ratios (i.e., too many students per teacher)
- High ratio of children with exceptionalities in certain classes
- Limited education/training for teachers on dealing with exceptionalities
- Lack of assessments / long wait times for assessments
- Lack of educational requirements for EPAs/TAs
- Inconsistency in terms of ETA/TA placements (i.e., high EPA/TA turnover)
- Failure to implement/follow adaptations and/or IPPs
- Lack of extracurricular activities / opportunities for students with exceptionalities
- Children with exceptionalities being taken out of the classroom for longer periods than deemed necessary
- Underutilized resources (i.e., parent volunteers, community groups)

Areas in Need of Improvement *(cont.)*

In addition, across groups, many parents criticized the **perceived lack education and continuing training** offered to teachers on the topic of inclusivity, as well as the **lack of education and/or experience requirements for EPAs/TAs**. As such, parents often felt that teachers and EPAs/TAs lack the necessary education and training to meet the learning needs of those with exceptionalities.



“[I’m] not sure if all teachers are qualified to deal with children who have a disability.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“There’s a lack of training on special needs. The role of the TA has changed to a glorified babysitter.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“We need more money for TAs, so that every child that needs a TA, gets a TA, [but they need to be knowledgeable]...If you’re not [properly educated], you’re not going to do what’s best for these children. – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“Teachers are not trained in the model of inclusive education. They look at you and ask what you want. It just seems no one has a solid understanding of what is inclusive education and what it should include.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“I think that whole profession needs to be remodelled. These TAs are being paid garbage money. They're not being treated as equals to teachers. Maybe if they were treated and educated better, they could earn more, you'd get more people wanting to do the job. It's a rough job, I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't want to go to work and get kicked and beat up. You have to start treating them better.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“I realize that there are a lot of different disabilities, but there are commonalities, and commonalities on how to best teach them, but teachers don't know that, they don't have that information.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“[There should be] some minimum requirements for some of these people that qualify for these positions [EPAs/TAs]. Don't draw anyone off the street.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“One thing that bothers me is that teachers out there don't have one clue about special needs, even though they're teaching students with them...that said, [I appreciate that they can't give] extra time to everyone, otherwise nothing would get done.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“It seems like they aren't getting the proper education to help the students who need assistance. It's a constant learning, they're always coming out with new information and more ideas for these people to use to help the students.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

Areas in Need of Improvement *(cont.)*

Other common criticisms of the current system included **high EPA/TA turnover** (limiting the ability of EPAs/TAs to build rapport and have a greater level of understanding on the unique needs of a specific child), a **lack of education for parents concerning the impact and benefits of inclusive education, long wait times for assessments** resulting in delays in children receiving appropriate adaptations/IPP, **failure to properly implement adaptations/IPPs** (along with a lack of accountability or ownership in implementing these adaptations/IPPs), **lack of extra-curricular activities for students with exceptionalities, too much administrative work for educators**, and **underutilized external resources** (i.e., parent and community group volunteers).



“...Administration and educators have been trained on systems and adaptations; however, they are not required or held accountable to use them for children. Basically how well teachers use inclusive techniques depends on their comfort levels.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“Teachers need to comply with adaptations. I shouldn't have to fight for what the resource teacher and principal say this is what she needs.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“There's a lot of switching to EAs and it takes a long time for EAs to be comfortable with all the different children. When they switch EAs all the time, my son is losing a lot.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“If those assessments aren't done in a timely manner, how are we supposed to get resources before it's too late?!?” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“It took years for my son to be diagnosed and as he struggled through school, we would be told by teachers "oh, if he'd only try harder, if he'd only pay attention" and it wasn't until finally a different psychologist in grade 11 did an assessment... it's almost too late to then.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“Children who are [caught] in the middle, who are without a diagnosis are really struggling in school.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“I feel like [the system] failed for my child. He struggles because his adaptations are not put in place. Sometimes they will send him down to the resource area and he doesn't feel like he fits in there, but he doesn't feel like he fits into the regular classroom because he struggles.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“The amount of paperwork and recording and reports that goes into creating IPPs for children with special needs or learning disabilities is crazy and think it's a huge hinderance. There's way more paperwork than there needs to be. That time could be spent on teaching in the classroom.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

Areas in Need of Improvement *(cont.)*

Of note, while a few parents of children with exceptionalities felt that their child's needs were clearly better served with them being placed within a Learning Centre as opposed to the regular classroom, many felt an inclusive classroom placement was essential for their academic and/or social development. That said, some parents noted difficulty in **achieving an 'ideal' balance of in-class and out-of-class learning** that would best accommodate their child's unique exceptionalities, while still allowing for social inclusion. Indeed, many parents of children with exceptionalities noted that their children prefer to stay in-class, and do not wish to be segregated from their peers. Further, a few parents expressed frustration with the amount of time their child is segregated, believing **children are segregated unnecessarily at times**. Finally, a few parents of children with exceptionalities felt that **excessive priority is given to safety over education**. Indeed, several parents, across locations, consistently noted having to prove their child was a 'flight risk' or 'potentially violent' in order to ensure in-class support resources is available.



"Overall the education system is mostly inclusive [but] maybe a little too much time is being spent outside the classroom for special needs children." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

"I think they do a good job including all kids in the classroom, but sometimes [educators] use it as a threat...if you misbehave we will have to go to the Learning Centre." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

"Now with the inclusion, from a social aspect, my son has really struggled with the prospect of being sent to the resource area of the school with other students who are a bit more disabled than him...for him to be in the classroom, with his peers, socially, I feel he is where he needs to be for his self-esteem. At the same time, when he's not able to do the work that he's given because his adaptations aren't being implemented, it's a struggle." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

"With my son's TA, they tried to take him to the Learning Centre too often and they were getting the response back from him that he wanted to be back in the classroom. They want to be in the classroom with others, they don't want to be alone. They know they're not learning on the same level, but they still need to feel that they are the same." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

"Because there's not enough support for the teachers, priority needs to be given to those children who pose a risk with their behaviour. Which is something that was said to me, because my child wasn't overly aggressive. He wasn't bad enough to get that extra support that he needed. A year and a half minimum on the wait list if I wanted to have him assessed." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

"Unless your child is off the rails, the school doesn't pick up on the fact that they need additional assistance." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

"[It feels like they are operating] without any educational plan. The focus is on safety, but education is way down the list." – **Parent of Child With Exceptionalities**

Facts/Statistics

While parents are not necessarily shocked by Nova Scotia's lagging math and literacy scores, it is an area of high concern.

Parents were presented with several pieces of information regarding inclusive education and statistics regarding exceptionalities among school-aged children (as shown in the inset to the right). Overall, parents generally had similar reactions to the information. While most statements were not seen as being particularly 'surprising', many parents felt the information alarming, particularly in relation to approximately one-quarter of students overall not meeting grade-level expectations in terms of math or literacy, and the presumed impact this has for children looking to continue their post-secondary education and those entering the work-force. A number of parents of children without exceptionalities attributed student low-performance in these subjects to a insufficient focus on education (i.e., teachers having to spend an exorbitant amount of time addressing behavioural issues and/or assisting students with learning delays), and having funding being directed from other areas in order to accommodate those with exceptionalities in the classroom.



"I think we're failing a lot of the students if 1/4 are meeting expectations in math and literacy." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"I'm not surprised with [the math and literacy scores]. It's upsetting if anything, but not surprising." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"These kids are leaving the school system uneducated." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"We have teachers that can spend most of the morning not teaching, by trying to help a child not to harm himself." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"The numbers are shocking...kids are graduating from school and they're not meeting minimum requirements. From an inclusivity standpoint, I think it stands on its own that something is wrong with the program or in the way it's being executed. Teachers don't have enough aide in the classroom. There's not enough support, not enough training." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"When I see these statistics and I see that reality - when are we going to realize this is becoming the norm? We need to go bigger and look at the curriculum of our schools. Kids our changing. Their needs are different, they're learning differently, their relationship with the technological world has impacted them and we need to accept that or mitigate it and redefine what school is." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

PRESENTED STATEMENTS

- Roughly ¼ of all students do not meet grade-level expectations in math or literacy on provincial assessments. There is a high demand for various forms of math and literacy intervention.
- Students with complex needs are a small percentage of the school-aged population who require multiple forms of intensive support for significant challenges with behaviour, mental health, learning, development and/or communication.
- There are approximately 500 students in NS with complex needs and many have several diagnosed areas of challenge.
- There are 31 main diagnosis types [Participants were shown a breakdown of diagnosis types].
- Approximately ¼ of students with exceptionalities have autism as their primary diagnosis.
- 15% of students with complex needs require the support of 2 full-time teacher assistants at a time.
- Teachers, administrators and support staff in NS face many challenges in trying to address the needs of all learners in increasingly complex classroom.

Facts/Statistics (cont.)

Across groups, parents were particularly surprised by the apparent low-number of *complex* cases. Many parents were under the perception that portion of school-aged children with complex exceptionalities was far more prevalent. As such, these parents felt that the current system should be better able to deal with the challenges associated with inclusivity.

Of note, a few parents of children with exceptionalities were defensive when presented with this information, feeling that the information as presented implied that they should be grateful for the resources that are available, and more understanding of the burdens that are being placed on the system. Alternatively, others felt that these facts/statistics highlighted the growing number of exceptionality cases being encountered within the school, and the issue that funding has not kept pace with growing needs. A number of parents, especially those with children with exceptionalities, were skeptical of the fact that 15 percent of children with complex needs would have access to two full-time TAs.



“I know about 100 [children] in my area [with exceptionalities], and that is only a small part of the province.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“Where's the problem then? How can't you manage 500 students?!?” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“The statement that stuck out the most to me is the one that said students with complex needs are a small percentage of the school-aged population. It makes me wonder why we had to fight and advocate so hard to get the support.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“...why is the help not consistent and constant across the board if the number is so small?” - Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“They've done a good job at including everybody, but many children are suffering because of it. The kids are all suffering because there's not enough support.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“The last line, seems like it's written by the Union. I don't feel bad for them. Everyone faces challenges.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“The students with special needs are growing every year. It seems like more and more and we're getting less support. The support is not growing with the needs.” – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

“It's like, how dare we spend so much money on 500 kids.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

I'm a bit alarmed to see a percentage of the children would require two TAs. There are children in our school that have more needs than other children and none of them have two TAs. I don't think there are any children who are getting that support.” – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

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Parents of Children With Exceptionalities

While many parents of children with exceptionalities are highly involved in the education system, they typically do not view themselves as being a welcomed partner.

Overall, the current process was deemed to fall short of meeting needs for students with exceptionalities in terms of academic performance, social skill development and life skills. Across regions, parents of children with exceptionalities often described their relationship with their school/school board as an adversarial one, particularly within the junior and high school grades. Indeed, many of these parents often reported having more opportunities to meet with school officials when their child was in the elementary grades as opposed to junior/high school. That said, parents noted it was easier to meet with a single teacher in elementary school, as opposed to having to meet with multiple teachers in junior/high school.

Regardless, parents feel they have to be an aggressive ‘champion’ for their child and are forced to be defensive/confrontational in their interactions and communications with teachers and school board officials. Many of these parents noted facing significant push-back trying to access limited resources and supports for their child. Parents often felt that without their aggressive intervention, their children would likely ‘fall through the cracks’ of the system.



“There’s not enough communication between the parties; principals are not being made aware of issues within the classroom...nothing is being documented...if you don’t necessarily check in, I don’t think [adaptations/IPP]s are put into place...As parents we shouldn’t have to wonder if those things [that were recommended] are being implemented.” - Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“It’s really hard to not focus on the negative when you feel like you’re constantly fighting a system. You constantly feel that you are battling for your child, and that’s not a nice feeling as a parent; it’s not nice to feel like you’re being met with resistance when all you want is what’s best for your child. In order for [my child] to secure a TA for this year, the amount of leg work I had to do, considering [my child] has a life threatening disease – I shouldn’t have to do.” - Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“It’s not a support system, it’s a confrontation system between parents and schools, and that’s a fundamental problem.” - Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“[My son is] just going through the system; he’s not actually getting the proper education that he needs. He’s going through the system on roller-skates basically.” - Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

“They need to involve the parents more – get the parents’ view on [their child’s] education...[and give parents] a comfortable forum for us to speak our minds, and have people actually listen to us, because who knows our child more?!?...we know what abilities they have [and] can make recommendations on how to focus on those abilities.” - Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

Parents of Children With Exceptionalities (cont.)

As previously noted, many parents of children with exceptionalities expressed frustration with the lack of communication between themselves and the school system. Moreover, many felt that the limited communications that they did receive tended to focus on the 'negative' (i.e., addressing negative behavioural issues), rather than their child's overall performance. As such, these parents expressed a clear desire for a increased communication with educators that would provide feedback on both the positive and negative aspects of their child's academic and social development.

A few parents also noted experiencing push back from teachers and school officials when seeking support and discussing adaptations. Indeed, a few parents spoke of having to seek out their own medical and/or behavioural experts to speak on their child's behalf. It was felt that without this 'expert voice' concerns/issues regarding their child's education were often overlooked or ignored.



"...nothing comes home to me as a parent that says anything that might have happened in the day that might explain a terrible afternoon, evening...none of that is being given to the parents, and the TAs aren't allowed to give it to us, and the teachers simply don't have time to give it to you. It's a very closed communication system." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"I don't feel very involved in the system. The only time I feel involved in when the teacher will call and say your son's having trouble in this, and can you work on it at home." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"I've had a lot of interaction with our local School Board and you always get the feeling that, for the most part, they don't actually want the parents to give input unless they need your help controlling your child." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"I'd love to see more communication between the parent and the teacher. [If the] teacher everyday put a little green circle, or yellow, or red [mark down on a note to parents] just to let us know if it was a great day, an okay day, or a bad day....let us know that there were some green days...We also want to hear the positive." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"I'm lucky that I have good medical plan, so we actually bring the psychologist with us. They seem to be more attentive when we bring a professional with us. They seem attentive during the meetings, but [otherwise] the follow-through just may not happen." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"You have to identify parents as partners in a child's education, and I don't think that happens right now. I don't think parents are seen or viewed as an important or established partner...[getting parents' input] allows you [as a parent] to develop a sense of trust with the teacher..." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

Executive Summary
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Overall Perceptions of
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Children with
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Looking Forward

Parents overwhelmingly support the concept of inclusivity, but recognize that the current model does not work for anyone involved.

At the end of the group discussion, parents were asked to identify what changes were needed to ensure Nova Scotia's education system is best suited to meet all children's needs, including the needs of their own child. While parents recognize and appreciate that there is no easy solution, particularly given the varied needs across all stakeholders, they are cautiously optimistic regarding the future of Nova Scotia's educational system in terms of inclusivity, and offered a wide range of suggestions on what changes should be made.

Across groups, parents underscored the importance of inclusivity and felt that many of the challenges currently being encountered within the system would be adequately addressed through **increased funding**. Indeed, parents felt that additional funding was needed not only for increased staffing (i.e., additional teachers, EPAs/TAs, specialists), but also for ongoing education/training for those working directly with children with exceptionalities, and more adaptive equipment. As previously noted, many parents of children with exceptionalities felt that educators often did not have a sufficient level of knowledge and/or understanding of their child's specific exceptionality. In addition to funding, parents identified **improved communication**, **improved assessments**, and **greater accountability** in terms of implementing adaptations and IPPs as priority areas for change.



"The government is going to make a decision with the opinions of people that aren't living what we're living. I'm pleased they're considering making a change for the better, but it always concerns me that it's going to be a room full of academics who make that decision." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"My hope for the Commission is that there is strong leadership that is going to make decisions based on the best interests of the students, as opposed to what is the most popular among the teachers, the public or the politicians." – Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"When a profession, as a whole, declares the model currently in place is not working, we should listen to them. The statistics are showing that it's not working. They've already said what they need. I don't feel like anybody is listening to the teachers. I would just hope that the Commission listens to their suggestions." - Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities

"A provincial Committee with parents of kids with special needs [has] to assist with this....Resources really need to be reallocated. Bottom line, our province thrives or dies on the quality of its education system." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

"...more needs to be done to train teachers, support staff, more EPAs with better training are needed. Inclusive [education] is not just placing students in regular classrooms, and hoping for the best. [You] need to consider how to make it a positive learning experience for everyone in the class." – Parent of Child With Exceptionalities

Looking Forward (Cont.)

Finally, many parents, particularly those without children with exceptionalities, felt that full inclusion may not necessarily be always appropriate, feasible, and/or desirable depending upon a student's specific abilities and situation. Further, some felt that a more segregated approach may be more appropriate in the higher grades, particularly for specific classes that may not be of value to those with learning disabilities (e.g. physics). That said, parents felt that the level of inclusion offered would need to be based on each child's individual abilities and situation, and would need to be flexible (e.g., in-classroom support with peers, individualized instruction within smaller group settings, specialized learning environment, one-on-one instructions, or a combined approach).

Additionally, parents felt greater funding was needed in key service areas (e.g., speech pathologists, occupational therapists, mental health experts, etc.) to allow for more in-classroom assessments. It was felt that such specialists should spend more time in the classroom rather than in offices.



"Strictly based on the numbers that we were shown there, it sounds like the approach of inclusivity isn't working because the resources aren't there. The teachers don't have the appropriate skills or resources. The best way to get a bang for the buck from the perspective of actually educating the people with the needs is to have highly specialized people take the very small number of people who have these needs and focus on them in centres. It defeats the purpose of inclusivity part of it, but it would improve the possibility of the education. There would have to be an integration with the rest of the student body somehow. Whether it be a co-op, where some part of their education is mixed....I think it would have to separate and focused on the way that these children learn and that would mean segregation to some degree. It would have to be somewhat adaptive. It would have to be a constantly evolving process." – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities**

"...what are the best interests of each child? Would some benefit from having a community of children with like needs? Where are the voices of the children in the system? What do the children with special needs want in terms of accommodation?" – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities**

"You have to look at each child developmentally. As they get older, their needs change. Sitting in a classroom, some things are not important to each child... there are times when sitting them in a physics class, if that's not where they are developmentally, [may not be appropriate]. They need to be in a situation appropriate for them and their learning abilities." – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities**

"I wonder if there is a model where there can be some inclusion, but not a full day inclusion. Maybe math class is segregated a little bit depending on their math level. Something where it's not an all or nothing approach." – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities**

"They need to look at children individually to see what their needs are. The support has to be individualized." – **Parent of Child Without Exceptionalities**

Looking Forward (Cont.)

Parents offered consistent direction on the future of inclusive education in Nova Scotia. The following pages provide a brief overview of parents' common recommendations for change going forward.

Consistent Standards Regarding Staff and Student Ratios

Across groups, parents commonly cited lower classroom sizes as an important change needed in order to ensure teachers have more time to address the individual needs of each child, particularly in classrooms with a higher number of students with exceptionalities. Similarly, many parents (particularly parents of children without exceptionalities) felt that there should be standards in place across schools to ensure resources are scaled to need, with staff resources being appropriately allocated and appropriate ratios in place (i.e., ratios of students with exceptionalities-to-students without exceptionalities, EPAs/TAs-to-students with exceptionalities).

EPA/TA Education & Training Requirements

While EPAs/TAs were widely praised for their work, particularly among parents of children with exceptionalities, several parents expressed frustration with the lack of education, accreditation and/or experience requirements needed for employment. In order to ensure EPA/TA staff have the necessary knowledge and skills required for such a position, it was felt there needs to be minimum education and/or relevant work experience requirements in place when hiring. Further, parents felt that properly trained EPAs/TAs were often underutilized by teachers, and that their role could be further elevated in the classroom (i.e., providing additional support and guidance to students experiencing difficulties). Finally, efforts should be taken to minimize EPA/TA turnover and greater attempt made to keep the same EPA/TA with a given child, where appropriate and possible.

Professional Development for Teachers

Many parents felt that teachers themselves often lack an appropriate level of knowledge regarding specific, commonly encountered exceptionalities (e.g., ASD, ADHD, Down Syndrome, etc.), and best practices / strategies in terms of teaching children with such exceptionalities. As such, parents felt a review of the school board's continuing education / professional development offerings was needed.

Assessment Review & Early Intervention

To ensure children with exceptionalities receive appropriate education, greater focus is needed on early intervention, with shorter wait times for assessments to determine what specific supports and resources are needed. Further, parents, particularly those of children without exceptionalities, felt that levels of inclusivity may need to vary depending upon assessment results, and individual child needs. These parents felt that a fully-inclusive approach may not always be appropriate, feasible and/or desirable for all students. Parents felt it important to base the level of inclusion on each child's individual abilities and situation. That said, parents also recognized the importance of parental and student input (where possible) in the process.

Additionally, parents felt greater funding was needed in key service areas (e.g., speech pathologists, occupational therapists, mental health experts, etc.) to allow for more in-classroom assessments.

Looking Forward (Cont.)

Ensure Equitable Distribution of Adaptive Equipment

Policy is needed to ensure equitable distribution of adaptive equipment/technologies across schools and school boards to fairly address the needs and learning requirements of children with exceptionalities across the province.

Improved Communication

Improved communication is needed in any new model, at all levels. Parents express clear desire for greater communication and a stronger sense of partnership with schools. Stronger communication is required, not only between themselves and teachers (e.g., online chat portal, town hall meetings), but with EPAs/TAs as well. Policy changes should be considered to once again allow EPAs/TAs to communicate directly with parents, and permit EPAs/TAs to attend school meetings (if desired by parents). Further, parents believe improved communication within the system is also required (communication between teachers and EPAs/TAs and with teachers and administrators).

Enhanced Accountability

Greater accountability is required at all levels. In order to ensure children with exceptionalities receive the best possible education to meet their individual needs, learning requirements, and educational goals, evaluation and assessment frameworks are needed to ensure educators are held accountable for the implementation of adaptations/IPP, with consequences in place for failure to do so.

Administrative Support

Efforts are needed to decrease the amount of administrative work required by teachers and support specialists. Indeed, parents recognize the varied demands on educators, and as such, felt administration could do a better job providing teachers with additional supports/resources (e.g., test template). Similarly, many parents felt that support specialists need to spend a greater percentage of their time in the classroom, and less time in the office.

Promote Public Awareness

To build greater public awareness and understanding of inclusive education, School Boards should consider developing a communication piece about inclusive education that fully explains what it is, the benefits of such an educational model, answers to common parent and student questions, and tips for parents on how to talk to their child about inclusivity.

Examination of Best Practices

Finally, while parents generally had little to no exposure to inclusive education models in other jurisdictions, parents felt the Commission should do an in-depth examination of best-practices in other provinces or countries (e.g., Newfoundland & Labrador, The Netherlands), in order to incorporate processes and standards with a proven track record.

Final Comments

At the end of the group, participants were asked if they had any further recommendation or suggestions for the Commission as it looks to develop new policy, definition and model for inclusive education in Nova Scotia. Parents generally offered commentary consistent with previously mentioned recommendations/suggestions; however, a few noted other proposed changes, including:

- **Eliminate split grade classes** (so education is more focused at the individual grade level, and not having to reach such a wide-range of educational needs)
- **Reallocate resources at the School Board level**, and put **additional resources in the classroom**
- Make continuing **education/training regarding inclusivity mandatory for teachers and EPAs/TAs**
- Ensure that **final recommendations of the Commission are promptly considered and implemented** (as appropriate) by Government
- **Ensure assessments are done in 'realistic' environments** (e.g., similar level of distractions that would occur in a classroom environment to ensure better accuracy of assessment results)
- Have **multiple Sensory Rooms** in larger schools
- If possible, **use assessment results to help determine EPA/TA placement** (e.g., matching a child's exceptionality with an EPA's area of expertise/training)
- **Examine opportunities to provide additional hands-on inclusive education** training to university students who are in the process of completing their Bachelor of Education degree
- Greater consideration when **deciding whether or not a child should repeat a grade-level; reconsider the concept of 'no student fails'**
- **Increased opportunities for parents and/or community organizations to volunteer** within the classroom/school system and provide support (where appropriate)
- **Provide additional guidance to parents** on specific teaching techniques that may assist their child's learning at home (i.e., not simply identify an area where a child is struggling, but provide specific additional resources for parents to use at home)
- Establish a **zero tolerance policy in relation to violence** in the classroom. While parents endorse the concept of inclusivity, there was general agreement that if a student with exceptionalities is violent in the classroom, inclusion should be reconsidered.