

Transition Planning for Children with Additional Needs

Starting school is an important period in a child's life, marking the first step of a child's school career. How a child experiences the transition into school can greatly impact how they view school and can influence their level of comfort and success for years to come. Such an important transition can create anxiety for all parents, in particular parents of children with additional needs. For children with additional needs, "entry to school is more complex and requires careful planning and coordination."¹

In an effort to ensure consistency across the district and to facilitate a smooth transition to school for children with additional needs, the District of Parry Sound Best Start Network initiated the *Transition Planning for Children with Additional Needs* district-wide project. A focus group², comprised of personnel from the three school boards in the district of Parry Sound, representatives from local service providers and early childhood settings as well as parents of children with additional needs, was created to examine current practices related to the transition into school for children with additional needs. This analysis included a review of existing documentation and procedures as well as a survey designed to highlight helpful practices while identifying elements that should be included in the transition process. The focus group's goal was to craft a detailed district-wide transition process to help ensure a positive experience for children with additional needs starting school.

A successful transition into school is dependent on the development of a respectful partnership between parents, the school board and community partners such as early childhood settings and service providers. Based on this knowledge, the focus group's work was driven by the principles of collaboration, information sharing and open communication as well as detailed planning and preparation. The important role of each partner was highlighted while keeping the recipient of this partnership, the child, in mind.

This focus group succeeded in pulling together the collective knowledge and experience of its members, as well as information from existing documentation, to create the following resources:

- *Entry to School Planning Calendar* and parent bookmark;
- *Entry to School Parent Resource Guide*.

The *Entry to School Planning Calendar* outlines responsibilities of parents, the school board and agencies, up to a year in advance, in order to ensure the child with additional needs experiences as smooth a transition as possible. The parent bookmark presents information from the parent column of the calendar in a bookmark format to facilitate easy review and planning.

The *Entry to School Parent Resource Guide* provides parents with information and tips regarding key components of the transition to school. Although created for parents, this resource guide can prove beneficial for staff of early childhood settings and service providers supporting children and their families. The format of the resource guide aims at facilitating quick access to key topics. Each topic is presented as a one or two page document. Topic documents were deliberately limited to a maximum of two pages to ensure essential information was highlighted and to respect the parent friendly nature of the resource guide.

Parents wishing more in-depth information will find some additional resources they can examine.

In an effort to include all children who require additional support and services, the focus group chose to use the term *additional needs* rather than *special needs*. The term *special needs* tends to refer to children who have received a formal diagnosis and may fail to acknowledge the needs of children who have received and will require varying levels of support but do not have a formal diagnosis.

Project leads would like to thank all of the focus group members for their commitment to this project and to the children they serve. A special thank you to the parents who kindly volunteered their time to review every part of this resource to ensure it met its goal as a clear, user friendly resource for parents of children with additional needs. In addition, the focus group would like to thank the District of Parry Sound Best Start Network for entrusting it with the very important task of creating a district-wide approach to the transition into school for children with additional needs and their families as they embark on this very important part of their journey.

¹Planning Entry to School, a Resource Guide (2005) Ontario's Ministry of Education

²Focus Group Membership

- Almaguin Highlands Community Living (AHCL)
- Community Care Access Centre (CCAC)
- Community Living Parry Sound (CLPS)
- District of Parry Sound Best Start Network
- Hands, the Family Help Network
 - Infant and Child Development
 - Treatment and Intervention Preschool to Six (TIPS)
- Near North District School Board (NND SB)
- New Horizon Montessori Early Learning Centre
- Nipissing Parry Sound Catholic District School Board (NPSCDSB)
- North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit (NBPSDHU)
- One Kids Place Children's Treatment Centre (OKP)
- Parents of children with additional needs
- District of Parry Sound Social Services Administration Board (PSDSSAB) – Children's Services
 - Integration Support Services
 - Licensed Child Care
 - Early Years/Best Start Child and Family Centres
- Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board (SMCDSB)

