



# Supporting Meaningful Consultation with Parents

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British Columbia Council of  
Administrators of Special Education (BC CAE)

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# Meaningful Consultation

Meaningful consultation is not a structure; rather it is a process that underpins educational decision making. Meaningful consultation is necessary when decisions are made that will have an impact on a student's education program, and it is essential that this process includes the student's family and/or caregivers. To the extent appropriate to the student's age and ability, the student should also participate in the process.

•A .....  
.....  
..... *prior* .....  
(Lower Mainland Directors of Student Support Services, 1998).

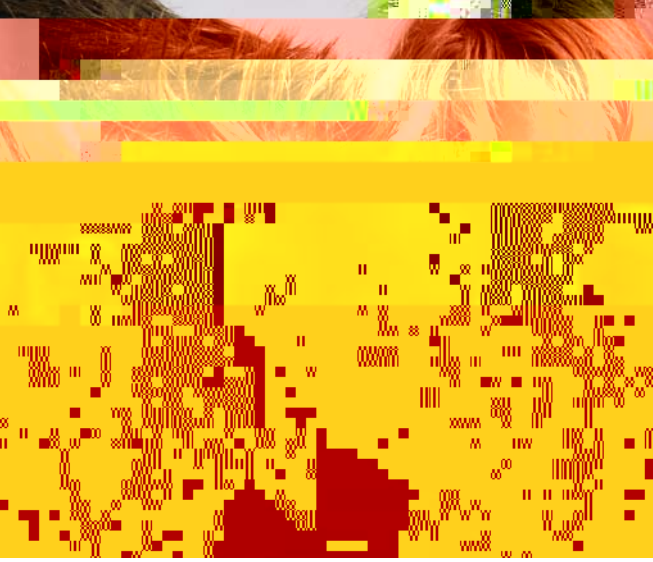
# Guiding Principles for Meaningful Consultation

## The family is the expert on the child

School teams bring to the decision making process expertise on curriculum, educational programming, and knowledge of the interaction of the student in the school setting; families bring an in-depth understanding of the needs of their children.

## Mutual respect is essential for meaningful consultation

Mutual respect is characterized by an understanding that all individuals involved in the consultative process have a contribution to make. Families and school representatives may enter the process with differing levels of need, strength and skill. Mutual respect is best maintained when all participants recognize that



### Meaningful consultation

### Meaningless consultation

Consultation happens ...

in an on-going fashion, and prior to any decisions.

after the decision is made ... families are informed of decisions.

Schools ...

carefully consider student and family

see themselves as 'knowing better'.

# Critical Elements for Meaningful Consultation

## Relationships

Relationships between families and schools are at the heart of meaningful consultation. It is important to:

- € Communicate to parents that their involvement and support make a great deal of difference in their children's school performance
- € Plan for opportunities to learn more about each other and what strengths, needs and values each individual brings to the process
- € Invest time in developing relationships through open communication
- € Emphasize that parents are partners of the school and that their involvement is needed and valued.

## School culture

School culture has a critical role to play in many aspects of student life and learning and in the relationship parents may have with the school. It is important to establish and maintain a school culture that:

- € values diversity as a strength
- € models respectful interactions at all time
- € has a climate where all parties feel safe to share ideas freely
- € accommodates family experience, diversity and literacy level and parent level of advocacy
- € understands that parents differ in their ability to communicate their hopes for their children
- € understands that parents may have had a negative experience in previous interactions with

## Benefits of Meaningful Consultation

Schools and families who engage in meaningful consultation have reported that there are many benefits to working together toward solutions. Meaningful consultation may help to:

- € Avoid angst
- € Keep everyone solution focused
- € Maintain mutual respect
- € Proactively avoid future problems
- € Avoid wasted time
- € Find the best possible successful solution for the child

## Risks of Not Engaging in Meaningful Consultation

Imposing a decision or reaching a decision without meaningful consultation may result in:

- € Ongoing difficulty ... problems solved without consultation tend to resurface
- € Growing anger and resentment, that may make subsequent consultation difficult
- € Loss of credibility and trust
- € Inaction

## Barriers to Meaningful Consultation

Implementing the philosophy of meaningful consultation may mean some changes in the way decisions are made, and certain barriers may occur in the implementation:

- € Consultation fatigue ... schools and parents may feel that it will take too much time
- € Judgment, or a culture of blame
- € Fear of change (leads to defensiveness)
- € Use of emails and potential for misunderstanding
- € Time pressures

### When do we use meaningful consultation?

Because meaningful consultation is a process that underpins all interactions with families, it follows that informal consultation should be initiated early and then maintained in the relationship. More formal consultation that includes families as active partners may be considered for any situation that involves decisions around the educational programs of students. Some examples of these situations could be:

- € Deciding to adapt or modify a program
- € Individual educational planning
- € Moving to a different program or class
- € Involving the school psychologist, counselor or other professional with the student
- € Referring the student to Special Education programs and services

### At what point is meaningful consultation concluded?

Ideally, meaningful consultation continues until a solution satisfactory to all parties is reached. However, the purpose of meaningful consultation is to facilitate informed decision making, not to make the decision itself. A meaningful consultation process is concluded when those individuals making the decision communicate the results clearly to all contributors, including the decision reached or action taken, and the rationale for the decision.

What if the individual/s affected do not agree with the decision, it follows that informal consultation should be initiated early and then maintained in the relationship.



## How Do We Get Started?

- € Be prepared to select a neutral site for the meeting. Parents sometimes feel at a disadvantage when meetings are held on school property.
- € Try to listen to the message being communicated and not get sidetracked by how it is delivered.
- € Do not get caught in the medical model of thinking where the educators have to be •the expert•. Parents have significant insights and expertise about their child.
- € Provide parents with an overview of the process and a time frame for decisions to be made.
- € Stick to agreed-upon time guidelines.
- € Do not assume that everyone understands each other•s language (e.g. acronyms). Use jargonless language or provide a glossary.
- € It is acceptable to wait on a decision. Sleeping on a potential decision can be a good thing.
- € Consider the means by which you communicate. Emails and other forms of unspoken communication can leave room for misinterpretation. When possible, engage in face to face conversations.
- € Be patient. Building trusting relationships with families can take time.
- € Understand that repetitive questioning is not always a challenge of a decision. It can be part of the process towards understanding.
- € Consider the parent•s perspective. The parents may be grieving the loss of the child that they had envisioned (even years later). They may also feel vulnerable. Many parents of students with special needs, for example, have lost

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# Suggestions for Running a Meeting that Sets the Stage for Meaningful Consultation

## Beforehand

1. Agree upon time, location, etc.
2. Extend Invitation.

## Start the Conversation

1. Establish rapport
2. Communicate philosophy of meaningful consultation
3. Establish purpose of the meeting
4. Set expectations (e.g., what is the length of the meeting, agenda, invite everyone to speak, discuss possibility of several meetings, etc.)

## Painting the Picture

1. Establish a goal statement. What would a successful outcome look like?
2. Describe and analyse the problem and look for patterns and connections
3. Identify the positives
4. Describe what is in place, where the student is and/or what is working
5. Describe the barriers and what needs to be overcome.

## Creating a Manageable Scene

# Case Study: Mark

Thirteen-year old Mark is unable to concentrate on his school work. He struggles with reading and his writing skills are significantly delayed. Mark demonstrates a cool •tough-guy• façade.

The school principal has a decision to make about Mark's program. The responsibility rests with the principal to ensure that meaningful consultation occurs before a decision is made.

Is there a need to consult?

Yes. This decision follows on the heels of a serious concern about Mark's unhappiness at school and the escalation of his externalizing behaviour. A decision to place him in a new school represents a major intervention.

Who needs to participate?

The parents, the case manager, classroom teacher, school counselor.

When can we meet (share concerns and hopes)?

The principal consults with all parties, offering a choice of three meeting times.

Set a time and state the purpose of the meeting.

The principal sets the meeting time, arranges a meeting room and lets everyone know that the purpose of the meeting is to focus on Mark's return to school/schooling and how to support more adaptive functioning (i.e. address his emotional and learning needs).

At the beginning of the meeting the principal sets the stage by making introductions and welcoming each person. He asks Mark's case manager to take notes to be copied at the end of the meeting for everyone. He clearly states that parental involvement and support are appreciated because they are essential elements of school success. Each person is invited to give a perspective and speak to important aspects of how to

support Mark. Discussion centers on Mark's strengths, needs and how to best intervene in the short term to stabilize his behaviour and provide for meaningful learning/progress. The principal listens to the contributions of each person. He ensures that everyone has the opportunity to speak and directs the conversation by thanking members for their statements, stating what he has understood and offering his own perspective. He concludes the meeting by expressing appreciation for each person's attendance and contribution, stating his wish for Mark's success. He is clear in when he will make his decision about Mark's return to school and confirms contact information so he can call or email parents and school staff once his decision is made. He is also clear that once the decision is made, the course of action will go forward with a review date to be included with his decision.

Eight year old Janice is a student with autism spectrum disorder whose academic prog

The school principal has a decision to make about Janice's program. The responsibility rests with the principal to ensure that meaningful consultation occurs before a decision is made.

Is there a need to consult?  
Yes. This decision will affect the basic structure of Janice's school day and has potential intended and unintended consequences.

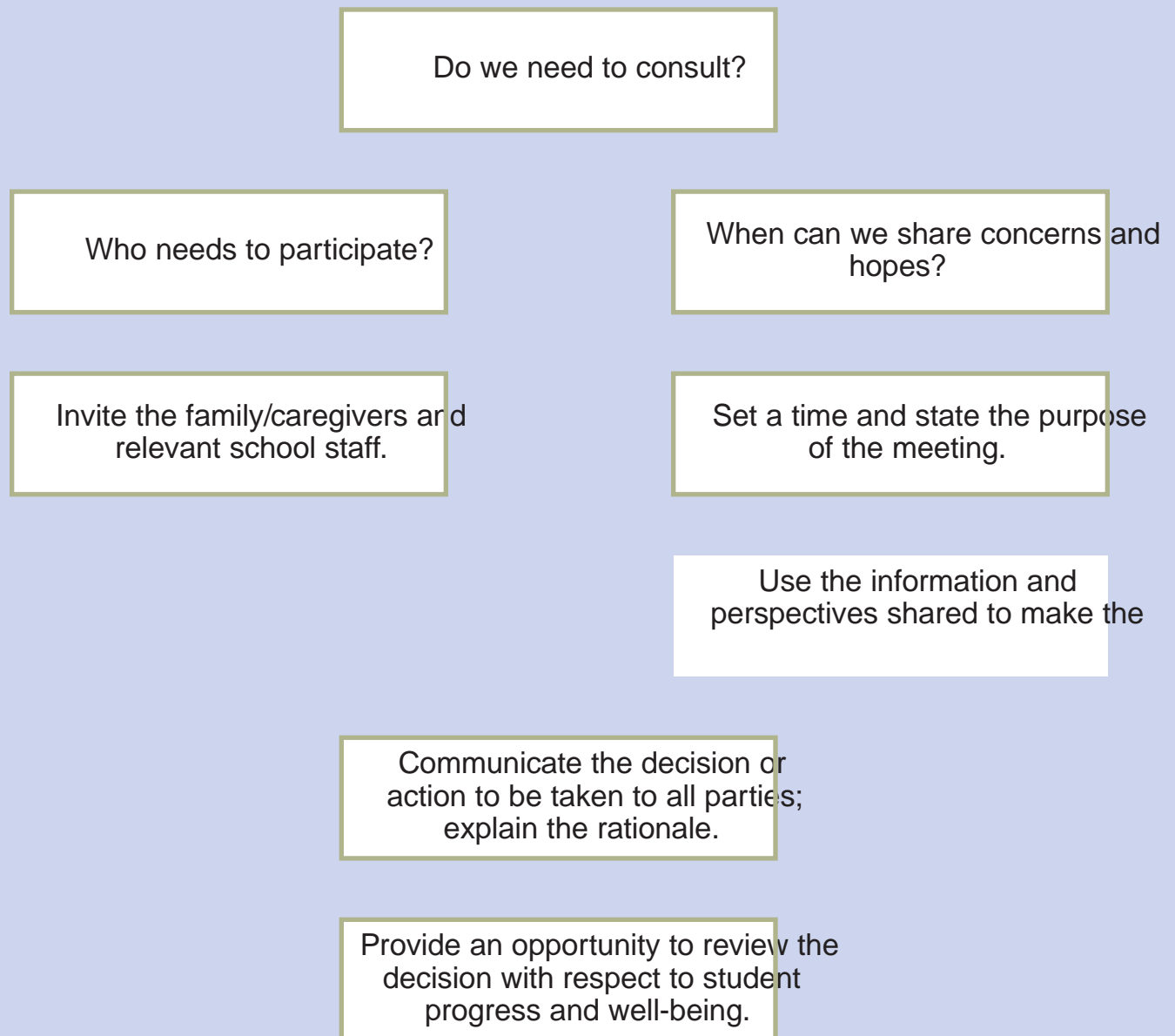
Who needs to participate?  
The parents, the case manager, classroom teacher, school counselor.

When can we meet (share concerns and hopes)?  
The principal consults with all parties, offering a choice of three meeting times.

Set a time and state the purpose of the meeting.  
The principal sets the meeting time, arranges a meeting room and lets everyone know that the purpose of the meeting is to focus on Janice's current strengths and needs as a learner and a member of her class.

At the beginning of the meeting the principal sets the stage by making introductions and welcoming each person. He asks Janice's case manager to take notes to be copied at the end of the meeting for everyone. He clearly states that parental involvement and support are appreciated because they are essential elements of school success. Each person is invited to give a perspective and speak to important aspects of how Janice's progress with communication and academics may allow her to have more independent access to the curriculum throughout her school day. Discussion centres on Janice's strengths, needs and how to best honour them as well as for meaningful learning/progress. The principal listens to the contributions of each person. He ensures that everyone has the opportunity to speak and directs the conversation by thanking members for their statements, re-stating what he has understood and offering his own perspective. He concludes the meeting by expressing appreciation for each person's attendance and contribution, stating his wish for Janice's success. He is clear in when he will make his decision about Janice's one-to-one support and confirms contact information so he can call or email parents and school staff once his decision is made. He is also clear that once the decision is made, the course of action will go forward with a review date to be included with his decision.

# Meaningful Consultation ... A Process for Collaboration and Shared Responsibility



# APPENDIX 1: Sample IEP Preparation Questionnaire

Child's name:

Age:

Child's strengths:

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Child's challenges:

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Child's preferences/likes:

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Top 3 wishes for my child (academic/social) are

# APPENDIX 2: Sample IEP Planning Team Members Form

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Members	Services Provided
Parent	
Administrator	
Classroom Teacher	
Case Manager	
Learning/Resource Teacher	
Counselor	
Speech/Language	
Pathologist	
Occupational	
Therapist	
Physiotherapist	
Special Education Assistant	
Other	
Other	

APPENDIX 3: Sample Summary and Action Plan of Meeting F

A large, empty rounded rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page below the title. It is intended for a sample summary and action plan.



# APPENDIX 4: Sample Action List Form

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
Done:

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
Done:

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
Done:

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
Done:

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
Done:

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
Done:



## REFERENCE

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Anita DeBoer, Ph.D., Ed.D.  
1995 ... 2000 (Third printing)  
Sopris West

