

Understanding Categories of Exceptionality

What is an Exceptional Student?

A student is identified as exceptional through the [Identification, Placement and Review Committee \(IPRC\)](#) process. The IPRC process is prescribed by law, under Regulation 181/98 ([Regulation 181 – Education Act](#)) of the Education Act. The IPRC is a formal process used by school boards to decide whether the student is exceptional and in need of special education programs and services. The committee, consisting of the principal (or designate) and two staff from the school board, meets to decide whether a student is exceptional and to determine the placement that will best meet the student's needs. The committee uses information from observations, test results and assessments to determine whether the student meets the criteria to be identified as exceptional. The IPRC then decides if the student is exceptional and which category of exceptionality best describes the student's needs.

What are the Categories of Exceptionality?

The Ministry of Education has defined five categories of exceptionality and 10 sub-categories. The exceptionality categories are:

Behaviour

Communication

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Language Impairment
- Learning Disability
- Speech Impairment

Intellectual

- Giftedness
- Mild Intellectual Disability
- Developmental Disability

Physical

- Physical Disability
- Blind or Low Vision

Multiple Exceptionality

- Meets the criteria of more than one of the above

Where Can I Find the Definitions of the Categories Of Exceptionality?

There are two components to the definitions of the exceptionalities. The first is the definitions provided by the Ministry of Education and the second is the more detailed criteria used by each school board. The Ministry definitions are fairly broad and the school boards have developed their own criteria to support the process of identification. For example, the Ministry definition for Deaf or Hard of Hearing is:

- An impairment characterized by deficits in language and speech development because of diminished or non-existent auditory response to sound.

And the one school board as developed the following criteria for identification:

- A permanent hearing loss, substantiated by an audiological assessment (within the previous 12 months) by a registered Audiologist, which results in a need for accommodations and/or modifications to the classroom environment and/or program.

From this example, the broad Ministry definition has been augmented with the criteria the school board will use for

identification of exceptionalality.

The Ministry of Education provided definitions of each category of exceptionalality in the [Guide for Educators 2002](#) and a copy of the definitions can be found on page A18 to A20. At the present time, only one definition has been changed and that is the definition of Learning Disability, found in Policy/Program 8 Learning Disabilities (2014) [ppm8](#). Several other exceptionalality definitions are currently under review.

For the specific criteria used by your school board, check the school board website for the Categories of Exceptionality which should be found in the school board Special Education Plan.

What is the link between a medical diagnosis and exceptionalality?

The categories of exceptionalality are based on student learning needs and not diagnosis. For example, students with Autism Spectrum Disorders are identified under Communication category as their learning needs are impacted by the disruption of their communication skills. Similarly, students with a developmental disability are identified under Intellectual category as their learning needs are significantly impacted by their cognitive skills.

The Ministry of Education has been clear that they believe that the categories of exceptionalality are inclusive of all diagnosis and disabilities because they focus on learning needs, in broad categories of behaviour, communication, intellectual and physical. In November 2011, Barry Finlay, former Director of the Special Education Policy and Programs Branch, Ministry of Education, provided clarification about exceptionalities and diagnosis in a Memo to Directors of Education [2011CategoryExceptionion\[1\]](#). In the memo he provided examples to reassure families that the exceptionalities are inclusive of all students with special education needs. Barry

Finlay said:

“All students with demonstrable learning based needs are entitled to appropriate accommodations in the form of special education programs and services, including classroom based accommodations. Inclusion of some medical conditions (e.g., autism) in the Guide’s definitions of the five categories of exceptionalities is not intended to exclude any other medical condition that may result in learning difficulties, such as (but not limited to) Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Tourette Syndrome, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and Fibromyalgia Syndrome. The determining factor for the provision of special education programs or services is not any specific diagnosed or undiagnosed medical condition, but rather the needs of individual students based on the individual assessment of strengths and needs.”

Who decides if a student is exceptional?

The Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) determines whether a student is or is not exceptional, according to the categories of exceptionality, defined by the Ministry of Education, and the criteria for identification used by the school board. In deciding whether a student is exceptional, the committee will:

- Consider an educational assessment;
- Interview the parent(s)/legal guardian(s) unless waived or refused;
- Interview the student where practical and permitted by the parent(s)/legal guardian(s);
- The parent(s)/legal guardian(s) has the right to be present during the interview;
- Obtain and consider a health assessment and/or achievement assessment and/or a psychological assessment if required by the IPRC and with permission of the

parent(s)/legal guardian(s);

- Examine the description of the student's strengths and needs.

What is the exceptionality if the student has multiple needs?

Many students have multiple needs and may meet the criteria for identification under more than one category of exceptionality and school boards have varying practices. In most school boards the IPRC will look at all of the needs and determine which have the most significant impact on learning. For example, a student with cerebral palsy may have significant physical disabilities as well as a developmental disability. The IPRC may determine that the category Intellectual: Developmental Disability is the exceptionality recognizing that the student's intellectual needs have the greatest impact on learning. However, if the IPRC decides that both the physical and developmental disability are impacting learning they may identify the students under Multiple Exceptionality.

There are variations in the practices of different school boards and in some there may be a dual exceptionality or a main and secondary exceptionality. For more information, on the practices used by your school board, check the school board Special Education Plan or ask the school staff.

Will the student's exceptionality change?

The Identification, Placement and Review Committee must meet at least once per year to review the student's identification and placement. As the needs of a student who has been identified as exceptional are significant and likely to be long lasting, in most cases the category of exceptionality will remain the same throughout the student's school career. However, at each annual review, new information or updated assessments may be presented that requires consideration about the exceptionality. For example, a young student may be

identified as exceptional, Physical Disability but as they mature it may become clear that they are intellectually gifted. The exceptionality may change to Intellectual: Giftedness. This is one of the reasons that parents should participate in every annual IPRC review. For more information on the parent role check the article, [Should I attend the Annual IPRC?](#)

Determining if a student is exceptional is only one of the roles of the IPRC. In a future article information will be provided on the placement decision by the IPRC.