

**National Education Framework for Students in Canada:
A Collaborative Approach**

WHITE PAPER - Part 1

Horizon Education Foundation

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Introduction

Horizon Education Consulting Inc is a Canada-wide organization dedicated to assisting parents and caregivers in making informed decisions regarding their children's education, with a particular focus on students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Our mission is to ensure that every child, regardless of their unique profile, has access to equitable, high-quality education.

It supports families through the process of school selection, advocacy, and navigating the accommodations and supports required to ensure meaningful inclusion within their local education systems.

The **Horizon Education Foundation** is the charitable arm of the organization that works with policymakers, educators, and advocacy organizations to foster systemic change that promotes the inclusion, well-being, and long-term success of students across Canada.

Background -The Need for a National Education Framework

Canada remains the only G7 nation without a national education framework (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, n.d.), despite education being a fundamental pillar of society. While each province and territory maintains policies addressing special education and accommodations, approaches remain inconsistent and fragmented across jurisdictions. As a result, students and families experience unequal access to support depending on where they live.

This fragmentation is especially burdensome for families who relocate between jurisdictions, including military families, Indigenous families moving between communities, and families relocating for employment or housing. When documentation standards, eligibility criteria, and learning plan structures differ significantly across jurisdictions, families are often forced to navigate new systems from the beginning, delaying supports and creating unnecessary barriers.

Horizon Education Foundation is actively working to develop a National Education Framework that centers on the inclusion of all students while respecting provincial and territorial jurisdiction over education. The purpose of the Framework is to establish shared national objectives that all jurisdictions can work toward, while allowing flexibility in local implementation.

This Framework also prioritizes the integration of Indigenous perspectives, recognizing the importance of culturally responsive education and Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and community-based support, as part of National Truth and Reconciliation recommendations.

Plan Outline

1. Federal-Provincial-Territorial Collaboration

Education falls under provincial jurisdiction; however, national coordination is possible through collaborative structures such as the federal Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, n.d.) The Foundation's position is that a National Framework can be developed in a way that respects jurisdictional autonomy while promoting consistency in how students are supported across Canada.

This framework is grounded in federal-provincial collaboration models in healthcare. Healthcare is governed provincially, yet the federal government provides national leadership through shared principles and funding structures tied to the Canada Health Act (Government of Canada, n.d.).

The Framework proposes exploring the establishment of a Federal Minister of Education to work with the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and provincial-territorial Ministries of Education. CMEC already provides a forum for provinces and territories to coordinate education policy. A federal minister could lead national alignment, promote shared objectives, and provide oversight of targeted funding agreements.

This approach would not override jurisdictional authority; it would provide national guidance similar to the approach used in accessibility legislation: shared expectations, measurable outcomes, and transparent reporting.

2. Best Practices in Student Support Plans (currently under different titles across Canada such as Individual Learning Plans or Individual Education Plans)

One of the most significant areas requiring national alignment is the structure, language, and accessibility of student support plans for students with disabilities.

Currently, many jurisdictions use deficit-based terminology that can stigmatize students and discourage families from disclosing diagnoses or advocating for accommodations.

The Framework proposes a shift toward neurodiversity-affirming language that recognizes disability as an interaction between individuals and barriers in their environments, rather than as a personal deficit.

National alignment in student support plan terminology and format would:

- reduce barriers for families who relocate with a transferrable digital file
- improve consistency in accommodation planning,
- support continuity of learning and support services, and
- strengthen parent participation in education planning.

A Canadian Student Support Plan must be in accessible format including in plain language, aligned with National Accessibility Standards (see Section 4).

3. Jurisdictional Landscape Overview

To inform the development of a cohesive national framework, the Foundation is engaging with each province and territory to map existing education practices. This includes:

- Reaching out to each Ministry of Education to gather detailed information on Special Education policies, student support plan templates, eligibility barriers, accommodations and associated terminology
- Consulting with national organizations such as Inclusion Canada to identify best practices and persistent barriers
- Collaborating with the National Autism Alliance, and their National Autism Framework Strategy to position Horizon as a contributor to the education goals incorporated into the National Education Framework

As part of this outreach work, the Foundation's committees will also assess whether existing systems reflect accessibility best practices consistent with federal accessibility principles, including clear feedback pathways, transparent documentation, and measurable progress reporting.

4. Legislative Context: Motion M-78 and Related National Initiatives

Horizon's proposed framework aligns closely with the principles outlined in MP Mike Lake's Motion M-78 (Inclusion of People with Disabilities). This motion calls for inclusive education systems at all levels and lifelong learning opportunities that enable persons with disabilities to participate fully in society ([Parliament of Canada, 2023](#)).

Motion M-78 highlights disparities in access to education for children with disabilities, including:

- In low- and middle-income countries, approximately 50% of children with disabilities are out of school ([UNESCO, 2020](#)).
- A 2021 UNICEF report found that children with disabilities are 49% more likely to have never attended school compared to their peers without disabilities ([UNICEF, 2021](#)).

Motion M-78 further calls on the federal government to ensure that wherever it spends money on education—domestically or internationally—there is explicit consideration for maximum inclusion of persons with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Horizon's National Education Framework initiative aligns with existing national framework for First Nations Education and Official Languages Education as well as other national initiatives currently underway, including:

- The National School Food Program, which aims to ensure Canadian children have access to healthy meals at school ([Government of Canada, 2024](#)).
- The National Autism Strategy, being developed through collaboration between Autism Alliance of Canada, the Pacific Autism Family Network, and Autism Speaks Canada ([Autism Alliance of Canada, 2023](#))
- The National Early Learning and Child Care Strategy 2023 ([Government of Canada, 2023](#))

Together, these initiatives reflect Canada's increasing recognition that inclusion requires systemic planning, consistent standards, and measurable accountability.

Federal Accessibility Legislation: The Accessible Canada Act (ACA) and its Relevance to Education

Although education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, federal accessibility legislation provides an important national policy foundation that can strengthen inclusive education systems across Canada.

The Accessible Canada Act (ACA), enacted in 2019, establishes Canada's national framework for identifying, removing, and preventing barriers to accessibility.

Its stated purpose is to achieve a barrier-free Canada by 2040 ([Government of Canada, 2019](#)).

While the ACA primarily applies to federally regulated entities (including federal departments, agencies, Crown corporations, transportation, telecommunications, and banking), it represents a national articulation of accessibility as a human rights and equity priority.

The ACA is relevant to the development of a National Education Framework for students with disabilities for three key reasons:

1. National accessibility mandates consistent support, standards and expectations. The ACA demonstrates how Canada can establish shared principles and measurable outcomes while respecting jurisdictional autonomy.
2. Accessibility planning requirements provide a model for education systems. Under the ACA, organizations must publish accessibility plans, establish feedback processes, and produce progress reports. Provinces and territories should adopt comparable mechanisms within education systems to ensure accessibility is addressed proactively. This could include:
 - public accessibility plans at ministry, school board, and school levels,
 - standardized feedback mechanisms for families and students,

- annual reporting on progress toward inclusive education goals, and
 - clear accountability structures for barrier removal.
3. Accessibility is defined broadly, supporting a neurodiversity-affirming framework. The ACA emphasizes removing barriers across domains including communication, program delivery, information design, built environments, and technology. This aligns with universal understanding of disability as systemic and supports a strengths-based, neurodiversity-affirming model of education.

The ACA also complements Canada's commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly Article 24 (Education), which affirms the right to inclusive education at all levels (United Nations, 2006).

In October 2025, Accessibility Standards Canada released *CAN-ASC-3.1:2025 - Plain Language*, a national standard developed under the *Accessible Canada Act* to guide organizations in making all forms of communication clear, usable, and accessible. The standard defines plain language as communication designed so that the intended audience can easily find, understand, and use the information provided. It outlines a process of planning, drafting, audience testing, and revising to ensure that materials meet the needs of people with disabilities and others who face barriers related to language, cognition, or information design (Government of Canada, 2025).

This new federal standard is highly relevant to education, particularly in how information is communicated to students with disabilities and their families. Across Canada, families who relocate between provinces or territories must navigate entirely new systems to secure a support plan for their child, youth or young adult.

Each jurisdiction uses different terminology, templates, and documentation standards, often written in specialized or bureaucratic language that can be difficult for parents to interpret.

For military families, Indigenous families moving between communities, and others who move frequently, this duplication can delay access to supports and increase emotional distress and administrative burdens.

Integrating the federal *Plain Language* standard into the proposed National Education Framework would directly address this inequity. It would ensure that all education documents (plans, reports, consent forms, and parent communications) are written in accessible, family-centred language that is consistent across provinces and territories. This change would make the process of understanding and advocating for a student's needs easier, regardless of where a family resides in Canada.

Specifically, incorporating *Plain Language* into the National Education Framework would:

- Reduce interprovincial barriers by promoting consistent, easy-to-understand language and documentation templates for student support plans,
- Enhance equity and inclusion by ensuring parents and caregivers, particularly those with lower literacy levels, cognitive disabilities, or language barriers, can effectively participate in the planning process,
- Align education policy with federal accessibility priorities, reinforcing Canada's commitment to barrier-free communication under the *Accessible Canada Act*.
- Model best practices in accessible governance, similar to national initiatives like the National Autism Strategy and *Motion M-78* that emphasize inclusion and national collaboration.

Recommendation:

Horizon Education Foundation recommends that a National Education Framework explicitly align with the principles of the *Accessible Canada Act* by committing to barrier identification, barrier removal, accessible communication, and transparent accountability across jurisdictions and that this work be overseen by a Federal Minister of Education.

5. Timeline

The Foundation's goals are to complete the following steps by the end of this year:

- **Outreach:** Engage with Members of Parliament and provincial and territorial Ministries of Education to introduce the framework initiative, gather information on current practices, and track support.
- **Research and Data Collection:** Create a data base overview of the education landscape across Canada, focusing on policies related to students with disabilities and their accommodations.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Continue building collaborative partnerships with advocacy organizations on a provincial-territorial and national level and consult other key stakeholders.
- **Council of Ministers of Education:** Seek opportunities to present initial findings and an early Framework outline to CMEC to support national coordination and collaboration.

Conclusion

By the end of the 2026, Horizon Education Foundation aims to complete a comprehensive overview of current practices related to education across Canada. This overview will serve as the foundation for drafting sections of the National Education Framework that respects jurisdictional authority while promoting consistency, equity, and best practices in supporting students with disabilities.

By working collaboratively with provincial and territorial, Indigenous and federal stakeholders, alongside advocacy groups and education experts, Canada can move toward a more inclusive and equitable education system across the entire country, where all students have access to the accommodations and supports necessary to thrive.

Anchoring this work in existing national commitments—such as Motion M-78, the Accessible Canada Act, and accessibility standards developed through Accessibility Standards Canada—will strengthen the need and legitimacy of the Framework and support measurable progress toward inclusive outcomes across all education jurisdictions in Canada.

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