

SPECIAL EDUCATION

From the People for Education Annual Report
on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011



SPECIAL EDUCATION

An inclusive society cannot accept the idea that exclusion is normal.

John Ralston Saul

Thirty-one years ago, the province of Ontario passed legislation guaranteeing that all students, no matter how exceptional their needs, would have the supports they needed to attend and succeed in school.¹ The goal: schools as places where everyone can learn, inclusion is the norm, differences are celebrated and children's individual needs are met.

FEWER STUDENTS WAITING FOR HELP

This year, 17% of elementary students and 19% of secondary students are receiving some form of special education support—up from 11% and 14% respectively, since 2000/01. This increase may reflect, at least in part, successful efforts to get students off waiting lists and into services: The total number of elementary and secondary students on special education waiting lists province-wide has fallen from approximately 46,000 in 2000/01 to approximately 33,000 this year.²

These changes in student numbers may also reflect changes in the province's special education strategies. There have been increases in overall funding for special education, and there is a shift away from the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process—which gives “identified” students a legal right to the recommended service³—to the less formal Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Despite some improvements, there continue to be concerns with the number of students who have been identified but are not receiving recommended support. The number has improved since 2005/06, when People for Education began collecting this data, but this year, 23% of elementary schools (down from 35% in 05/06) and 21% of secondary schools (down from 28% in 05/06) report having identified students who are not receiving support.

CHALLENGES IN THE CLASSROOM

While there are more students receiving special education support, there has not been a similar increase in the number of special education teachers or educational assistants.

QUICK FACTS FOR 2010/11

- More than 10% of the provincial budget for education is spent on special education.
- 67 out of the province's 72 boards spend more on special education than they receive from the province.
- 30% of GTA elementary schools report that not all identified students are receiving recommended supports, compared to 15% of elementary schools in Southwestern Ontario.

In elementary schools in 2007/08, there was an average per school of one special education teacher for every 30 special education students. This year, it has increased to a ratio of one teacher for every 35 students. In secondary schools, the ratio is even higher. It has risen from 1:53 in 2007/08, to 1:58 this year.

Educational assistants in elementary schools often support special education students in regular classes, but this year, only 69% of elementary schools reported they have at least one full-time educational assistant, compared to 80% in 2007/08.

In their comments, many principals report more students are receiving supports in regular classrooms. However, at provincial special education consultations this year, participants acknowledged “many educators do not have the capacity to respond to students' complex needs” in the regular classroom.⁴

FUNDING FORMULA STILL NEEDS A FIX

Ontario does not provide special education funding to school boards according to the actual special education needs of the board. Although special education funding has nearly doubled since 1998, when the province introduced the provincial education funding formula,⁵ serious concerns remain about the way funding is allocated, and the adequacy and effectiveness of that funding:

- Without a standard definition of what “counts” as a special education support or service, it is difficult to provide funding to boards based on their actual needs.
- In 2009/2010, 67 of the province’s 72 schools boards spent more on special education than the amount they received from the province,⁶ with over half of those spending more than a million dollars above their allocation, and five large boards spending over \$10 million dollars more than they received.
- In total, school boards spent \$174 million more on special education than the province provided.⁷
- The percentage of students with special needs ranges widely from board to board, from a high of 25% in some boards, to a low of 5% in others.⁸
- Despite concerns identified by the Auditor General in 2008 and again in 2010,⁹ there is still no mechanism to assess the quality of special education services and supports in schools. Without information about quality and effectiveness, the system has limited means to improve services or manage costs.
- Because special education funding is based on numbers of students, boards with declining enrolment lose funding, even if the proportion of students requiring support is increasing.

MORE COORDINATION NEEDED

Differences between school board practices can have a significant effect: A parent and child can go through an IPRC process in one board, and have to repeat the whole exercise if they move because, in many cases, neither IPRCs nor IEPs are transferable from board to board. In some cases, students who move from one school board to another may even need new psycho-educational assessments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All students can learn and all students can succeed, but some students require different kinds of support.

People for Education recommends

- the province develop consistent definitions about “what counts” as special education services,
- the province develop a method to regularly evaluate the quality of special education services provided, the equity of access to the services and value for money, and
- with these measures in place, the province fund special education based on need.

WHAT PRINCIPALS TOLD US . . .

The special education teacher spends more time in the classroom. There are more children who need support for a variety of reasons that don't necessarily fall under a formal assessment.

Elementary School, DSB Ontario North East

More informally identified students are being serviced.

Secondary School, Thames Valley DSB

We are a small but industrious school, striving to meet the needs of our students with limited human resources and budget. Students needing 1:1 are not getting the support on a daily basis.

Elementary School, Avon Maitland DSB

The number of psychological assessments done in a school year had been reduced from 5 to 2. Case conferences with central staff for the year have been reduced from 4 to 3.

Elementary School, York CDSB

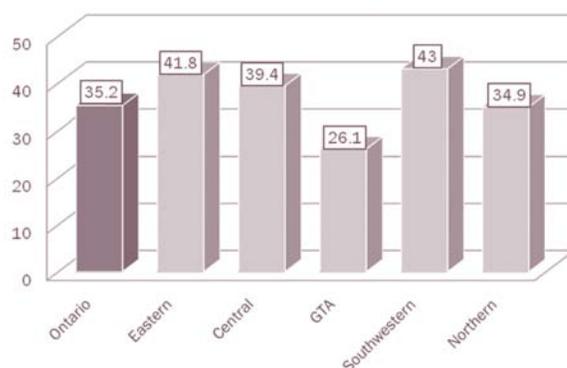
Outsourced therapies and assessments (CCAC) often have huge backlogs and to make matters worse, parents who move from one jurisdiction to another have to start all over again and this also happens with school board assessments.

Elementary School, Trillium Lakelands DSB

A new physically handicapped program was added—however facility renovations have not yet occurred.

Secondary School (Special Needs), Toronto DSB

Average number of special education students per special education teacher, in elementary schools



NOTES

- 1 See e.g. Ontario Special Education Advisory Committees. (n.d.). An historical overview of special education in Ontario. Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario. Retrieved from <http://seac-learning.ca/unit1.htm>
- 2 Extrapolated from the sum of students on waiting list in sample.
- 3 Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, as am. s.170.1(7): “Every board shall . . . provide or enter into an agreement with another board to provide in accordance with the regulations special education programs and special education services for its exceptional pupils.”
- 4 Special Education Policy and Programs Branch. (2011, February 15). *Reach every student: Special education consultation*. Toronto, ON: Ministry of Education.
- 5 Email from W. McNally [Director of Finance, Ontario Public School Boards' Association] to author on April 20, 2011.
- 6 Government of Ontario. (2011, May 3). Report, Freedom of Information Request No. EDU-11037.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See note 4.
- 9 Auditor General of Ontario. (2010). *2010 annual report, c.4.14*. The government responded to this concern by pointing to the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) and support for boards' internal audit capacity. The SEF does not appear to require any data collection on the effectiveness of special education support services. The unit of analysis is the individual school, so it doesn't appear to allow any systemic/comparative program/service assessment, which is particularly important for low-incidence exceptionalities. The government also points to a \$10 million investment to improve the boards' general internal audit capacity, which is a prerequisite for measuring effectiveness, but not a guarantee that it will happen without mandates or oversight.



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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To read the full 2011 report, go to <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Annual-Report-on-Ontario-Schools-2011.pdf>