SPECIAL EDUCATION

A People for Education report
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In Ontario’s publicly-funded schools, 17% of elementary students and 22% of secondary school students receive special education assistance—percentages which have increased steadily over the last two decades. The needs of these students are complex and span a broad spectrum: many require only minor accommodations, while others would not be able to attend school at all without full-time assistance.

Since 1980, Ontario has committed to supporting all students to “thrive and to gain full benefit from their school experience”. The challenges of meeting that commitment are felt every day in classrooms and schools, in families, and in school boards and the provincial government.

**We have 1062 IEPs to write. Coordinating this and meeting the 30 day deadline is an annual challenge. As well, IPRC reviews for each identified student pose a challenge when there are over 1000 identified students in the building.**

*Secondary school, Toronto DSB*

This year, the provincial budget for special education is $2.72 billion, more than 10% of the total K–12 education budget.

But even that amount may be insufficient: 79% of the province’s school boards spend more on special education than they receive from the province, and principals and callers to the People for Education parent helpline continue to struggle with seemingly intractable challenges to ensure that all children have a chance to learn up to their potential—with adequate, effective and timely programs and services.

**CHANGES TO FUNDING MAY ALLEVIATE PRESSURE**

The province has begun to institute changes to the funding formula that determines each board's special education budget, in an attempt to better match special education resources with demand.

While the full implications of the new funding formula are not yet known, the changes may have significant effects on special education in some boards.

In this report, we review the current state of special education in Ontario’s public schools based on People for Education's annual survey. We raise a number of critical issues facing the special education system, including the availability of supports for students with special education needs, and how and when students are identified with exceptionalities. We also highlight a widespread issue raised by parents calling the People for Education helpline: students with special education needs being asked to stay home from school for all or part of the day.

Finally, we explain recent changes to special education funding, and recommend what policy makers, boards, schools and parents can do to gauge whether the changes are successful.
SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORTS ARE KEY TO STUDENT SUCCESS

Though almost one quarter of Ontario students receive some form of special education assistance, the most recent figures show that only 2% of all students spend the majority of their day in a special education classroom.4

Students with special education needs receive support in a range of ways. They may get a little extra support from their homeroom teacher, or a variety of “accommodations” (e.g. laptops, more time for tests) set out in an Individual Education Plan (IEP). They can be withdrawn for all or part of the day to learn in a special education class or resource room. They may be supported—at least part of the time—by a special education educational assistant or other specialists.

Meeting the needs of these students is incredibly overwhelming. There are so many needs and they are so diverse. The range of needs and diagnosis of needs continues to expand. There are not nearly enough resources to support our needs but we do amazingly well with what we have.

Secondary school, Algonquin and Lakeshore DSB

Receiving timely and appropriate support is critical to the success of students with special education needs. In our annual survey of Ontario schools, People for Education asked about the availability of four key special education supports: special education teachers, special education educational assistants, assistive technology and other support staff.

Special education teachers

Special education teachers can work with individual students for part of the school day, provide support to classroom teachers, or teach congregated classes of special education students.

In Ontario elementary schools in 2014, there is an average of 37 students with special education needs per special education teacher. While this number has remained relatively stable for the last four years, it is a substantial increase from ratios pre 2010. The ratios range across the province, from a low of 26 to 1 in the GTA, to a high of 52 to 1 in Eastern Ontario.

In secondary schools, the average ratio is 74 students for every one teacher.

Special education educational assistants

Educational assistants (EAs, or Special Needs Assistants or Teacher Assistants) provide individual support to students with special needs. The assistance can range from supporting students with very high needs with things like eating, personal care or modifying behaviour, to providing academic support to students.

The change of focus for EAs to mainly health and safety of students has resulted in a change in the nature of the EA role. Many of the EAs came into this position to support learning in the classroom for mainstream students.

Elementary School, Halton DSB

The ratio of students to EAs in elementary school has remained relatively constant at 22 to 1, and principals continue to report that this ratio is insufficient to meet demand. In secondary schools, the ratio is much higher at 58 to 1.
In their comments, many principals said it is difficult to meet students’ needs without sufficient—and skilled—support from EAs.

Meeting the needs of all students is a challenge. We are told that EAs are “generated” through behaviour or medical reasons. With so many students with academic needs and so little support personnel it is difficult to ensure everyone gets what they need.

Elementary School, Thames Valley DSB

Assistive Technology: Over one-third of schools unable to meet demand

Technology has made a considerable difference in the lives of some students with special education needs and has been shown to have a direct impact on their achievement. There are a wide variety of technological supports available to help students learn and demonstrate their understanding, from screen readers and speech-to-text software to sophisticated communications software.

But access to these critical technologies is not consistent. In 44% of elementary schools and 33% of secondary schools, not all students have access to the assistive technology recommended in their psychological assessments or Individual Education Plans (IEP).

A number of principals report that assistive technologies have produced major benefits for their special education students, naming in particular things like using iPad technology to assist students with developmental disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder to communicate. But at the same time, they identify a number of barriers to access, including cost, limits of equipment and bandwidth, and the need for more training for teachers and EAs to support students’ use of the equipment.

To cover the cost of purchasing computers, software and computing-related devices for students with special education needs, and the cost of training staff and students, repairs and maintenance, the province provides boards with a Special Equipment Amount (SEA) based on total board enrolment ($36.10 per student). For other non-computer equipment such as hearing, vision or personal care support equipment, and physical assists support equipment, schools and boards must submit individual claims to receive additional support.

Different schools seem to take different approaches to addressing equipment costs: one principal reports, “we aggressively pursue SEA claims for any children where assistive technology is indicated by an appropriate source,” while in another school, the principal reported reliance on fundraising for this technology.

Students’ attitudes toward assistive technology may also have an impact on its use. A number of principals identify student resistance as a barrier, saying things like, “students steadfastly refuse to use assistive technology.” Others say that promoting tech use for all students results in “less stigma” around assistive technology.
**Integrating services and supports for students with special education needs**

A joined-up array of services can play a key role in supporting students with special needs. Health support services—including occupational therapists, physiotherapy, some speech therapy and nursing—are not provided by school boards, but by Community Care Access Centres (CCACs) or other agencies such as mental health services. In their comments, many principals emphasize the importance—and challenges—of coordinating necessary services and supports beyond school walls.

A principal from Hamilton-Wentworth DSB commented, “the school and community agencies need to be better integrated to support students fully and seamlessly. Consistent programming is not possible without opportunities to meet and co-ordinate for children.” In the Rainbow DSB, a principal noted “It is becoming increasingly important for outside agencies to work with and within the school to help service students and families in need. Teachers are not trained to handle the range of problems in the school.” Both of these boards have made integration of services for children and youth a priority.

The school and community agencies need to be better integrated to support students fully and seamlessly. Consistent programming is not possible without opportunities to meet and co-ordinate for children.

*Elementary school, Hamilton-Wentworth DSB*

Overall, integrating health and education services remains a challenge. Only 45% of elementary schools have regularly scheduled access to a speech language therapist. Speech and language therapists work with students—particularly young students—supporting their language development both directly and by coaching their teachers.

These professionals, on average, are scheduled for 13 hours a month. Apart from the 3% of schools with no access at all, in the remaining half of schools, speech and language services are available “on call.”

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

We have achieved 100% integration into scheduled classes...successful facilitation of inclusive practices and curricula.

*Elementary school, Simcoe Muskoka DSB*

In Ontario, the vast majority of students with special education needs are taught in regular classrooms by regular classroom teachers. In their surveys, many principals commented proudly on their success with inclusion.

We are doing an amazing job integrating the needs of special education students into the regular curriculum. This year we are focussing on differentiated instruction across the curriculum and the incorporation of various strategies into each and every class.

*Secondary school, Toronto DSB*

Other principals supported inclusive classrooms, but acknowledged that inclusion can bring challenges.

A challenge is moving towards inclusion in the classroom. Our school board is moving away from self-contained classes. This is having an impact on both staff (how and what to teach, how to assess, how to track progress electronically) as well as comfort.

*Elementary school, Avon Maitland DSB*
### SCHOOLS RECOMMENDING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS NOT ATTEND SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Had to recommend a student with special education needs not attend school full day</th>
<th>Elementary schools</th>
<th>Secondary schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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In those schools, the reason for recommendation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Elementary schools</th>
<th>Secondary schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... for safety</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... student health</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... necessary supports unavailable</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### SOME STUDENTS ASKED TO STAY HOME

This year, People for Education asked a new question based on many phone calls we receive from parents questioning whether a principal can send their child home from school for all or part of the day.

Almost half of elementary principals and 41% of secondary principals report they have recommended students with special education needs not attend school for the full day.

Under the Education Act, students between the age of 6 and 18 are required to attend school “unless excused” [when] “the person is unable to attend school by reason of sickness or other unavoidable cause.” At the same time, principals have a duty (subject to an appeal to the board) “to refuse to admit to the school or classroom a person whose presence in the school or classroom would in the principal’s judgment be detrimental to the physical or mental well-being of the pupils.”

Principals’ comments shed light on this widespread practice, showing that the line may be blurred between safety concerns and concerns about a lack of adequate resources. Their comments show that the decision to recommend students stay home fall into three categories:

**Short-term:** If a special education student’s required support is temporarily unavailable the principal may recommend the student stay home, for example, if an Educational Assistant who usually works with a student is absent and no substitute is available.

**Transitional:** A principal may recommend a student stay home as a provisional measure in order to ease a major change or disruption. Transitions may occur as a student starts school—“Some of our developmental disability students start on .5 day schedules”—changes school—“we needed to put a safety plan in place for a new student that presented some unanticipated challenges”—or enters into a specialized program—“no Special Needs Assistant available; child eventually moved to a specific special education program.”

Ongoing: In extreme cases, a principal may recommend a student be removed from school for most or all of the day if a school is unable to provide adequate care or safety provisions for the student.

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We have a [violent student] who requires two EAs at all times. He is able to attend 1.5 hours a day.

*Elementary School, Ottawa Catholic DSB*

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We have an Autism Spectrum Disorder student at the severe end of the spectrum. He is unable to toilet himself, and was not provided with a special needs assistant as requested. He was too disruptive to be kept in the building beyond 1 hour, 2 days a week.

*Elementary school, Toronto DSB*

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Some principals’ comments suggest that in some cases, these recommendations may relate less to practical constraints and more to a principal’s feeling that a student may not be capable of dealing with a full day of school. For example, “students not being successful in p.m.” “this student is not developmentally ready for a full-day program,” or, “Anxiety continues to play a significant role in determining the length of a school day a student can manage. The system needs to recognize that not all kids can attend a full day of school due to various mental health issues.”
Many principals report the decision for a student to stay home is made in cooperation with, or at the request of parents. For instance, “[the student] completed very little work at school and behaviour escalated so Mom was willing to have her son do some work at home at end of day,” or, “anxiety caused student to be unable to handle a full day; the student’s mother didn’t want community to talk about her child so only brought the student for a third of the day to avoid issues.” Another principal, noting that it is rare to recommend students do not attend for a full day, reports “usually, this is a request from parents due to a health issue.”

Notwithstanding the number of times principals and parents make the decision together to keep a student home for at least part of the day, the People for Education parent helpline receives calls regularly from parents who are concerned that they have been asked to keep their children home for part of the school day. They ask why there are not more supports available to ensure that their child can attend school as is his or her right.

Currently, there is little recourse for parents who are concerned about special education decisions and/or policy.

### THE ON-RAMP TO SUPPORT

There are a number of ways students can access special education services. They range from informal arrangements between parents, students and teachers, to formal processes that legally bind a board to accommodate a student’s special education needs.

Forty-one per cent of students with special education needs receive supports or accommodations without a formal review, but instead through recommendations set out in an Individual Education Plan (IEP). IEPs are developed by the classroom teacher alone or with support from the special education teacher, parent(s) and, at times, the school administration.

The majority of students receiving special education services (59%) are identified through the more formal assessment process, the Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC).

If the student is identified with an officially recognized “exceptionality,” the IPRC will include a recommendation for placement. Once students have gone through this process, they gain a legal right under the Education Act to special education programs and services.

Where there is an IEP without an IPRC, students do not have a legal right to services. Over the past decade there has been a steady increase in the proportion of students who have an IEP only, and a decline in the proportion identified through IPRC. The trend toward less formal identification has been encouraged by the province, at least in part because it is less cumbersome.

According to the Ministry of Education, the rate of formal identification varies considerably among boards—from a low of 1.8% of students with IPRCs in one board, to a high of 100% in another. In 5 of Ontario’s 72 school boards, more than 90% of students receiving special education services are formally identified. This is a decline from 9 out of 72 in 2012.
Further, principals continue to report hard caps on the number of assessments they are able to request in a year, with comments such as “We are only permitted to assess 2 students per year—this is not enough to assist in student achievement,” or, “the psychologist is employed by the Board. We have been told that we can have two psychometric assessments this year, so we have to prioritize.”

These comments confirm People for Education’s findings from the 2013 school survey, which showed 47% of elementary schools with a cap on the number of assessments that principals could recommend in a year.

Families and educators are deeply frustrated when students cannot get timely psycho-educational assessments. As one principal wrote, “We have students (and families) who have been on a wait list for psycho-educational assessment for 2–3 years due to the limited allowance/schedule.” Many principals express similar concerns.
Some—who can—are resorting to private assessments

It is possible to avoid the waiting lists for assessments by paying to have your child assessed privately. These private assessments can cost $2000–$3000. In some cases, parents seek these private assessments at the suggestion of their child’s principal. This year:

- 25% of elementary school principals report that “some,” “most,” or “all” parents use private assessments;
- 52% of schools report that “a few” parents use private assessments; and
- 24% report no families use them.

There is a strong relationship between the average family income per school and the likelihood that parents will use private assessments in the special education process.

While the private system co-exists with the public system—and perhaps provides an escape valve for the most affluent parents—this data makes it clear that for most students in Ontario, publicly funded assessments are the main option.

The “labelling” dilemma

The percentage of students receiving assistance from special education services has steadily increased over the years.

There is considerable debate about whether there is an actual increase in the number of students who need assistance, or whether it has become more common to identify students (formally or informally) with special education needs.³³

In some cases, principals report parents forcefully advocating for a special education identification for their child, in order to access the special education system and the supports it may provide.

Every other child is coming to the school with some type of need/diagnosis/label/etc., and the parents are demanding support for their child. The school is not equipped to adequately provide service for all the students who need the help—but we do the best we can.

Elementary school, Simcoe Muskoka DSB

On the other hand, there are principals who feel that students should be identified with special education needs, but report that there is considerable concern among parents about the stigma a special education identification may attach to their children.

The biggest challenge is to convince parents to allow their children to access more support. They do not want their children ‘labelled’ unless the ‘label’ is gifted. Even having a parent support the development of an IEP can be a challenge for the same reason.

Elementary school, Toronto DSB

There are vast differences among boards in their special education identification processes, which makes it difficult to know whether the increase in the population of students identified with special education needs has led to better services or outcomes for students who have learning challenges.
Funding for special education has been a perennial problem in Ontario. Finding an appropriate method to provide funding that will address the wide variety of needs, programs and services across Ontario has proved difficult, if not impossible.

This year, the province will begin the final stages of implementing significant changes to funding special education. The process to fully implement the changes will occur over the next four years. During that time, the province will gradually eliminate the amount boards were receiving for their “high needs” students, which was based on historical (and many argued, inaccurate) information, and funded some boards at a much higher rate than others.

When fully implemented, the new model is intended to be flexible enough to recognize differences among boards. It will be based on statistical data that calculates the probability of students having different special education needs. The changes will result in funding cuts in some boards and increases in others.

This year’s $2.72 billion special education budget includes:

- the basic per-pupil amount, which recognizes that in every board at least 15% of students will require some level of special education support, and funds the majority of students with special education needs;
- three-quarters of the amount that boards would have received under the historical High Needs Amount (HNA) model (this will be reduced by 25% per year for the next three years);
- elimination of the HNA “stabilization funding” which provided boards with a funding cushion as the historical HNA was reduced;
- a Special Equipment Amount (SEA) which funds equipment such as computers and hearing or vision support, and the Special Incidence Portion which funds staff to support students with exceptionally high needs; and
- the next steps in the phase-in of the new HNA model, including a High Needs Base Amount for Collaboration and Integration which will provide every board with a minimum of $450,000 to cover some of the costs of accessing high needs services and greater collaboration.

The new HNA model is an effort to recognize the differences among boards—both in terms of the percentage of students with special needs and the varying costs for services. The new HNA will estimate the number of students predicted to receive special education in each board based on two overall factors:

- the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model (SESPM), which will use Canadian Census data (this year, the province is using 2006 Census data) including median income, parent education, percentage of families who are below the low-income cut-off, unemployed, recent immigrants, and Aboriginal, and the percentage that moved in the previous year; and
- the Measures of Variability (MOV), which will include data from grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 EQAO tests, credit accumulation information, proportions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, percentage of small and remote schools, and the number of students receiving special education services.
It is a challenge for everyone in the education system to ensure that all students with special education needs have the appropriate supports and resources to promote their overall development and ensure they can achieve their full potential and long-term success.

Policymakers must continually struggle to balance the cost pressures of supporting students with special education needs with the awareness that educating all children is a core commitment in our society.

Currently, there are few system-wide standards for quality of special education programs or outcomes, and vast differences among boards in their special education identification processes, access to supports and services, and outcomes for students who have learning challenges.

The system also continues to be difficult for parents to navigate. Many parents are faced with substantial barriers when they advocate for their children, they are sometimes asked to exclude their own children from school, and they need extensive knowledge about their child’s learning needs, available programs, and the complex special education system to effectively support their children.

Changes to the funding formula for special education may result in a better match between the distribution of special education funds and level of student need within each board. But without more information on the effectiveness of a range of special education programs and supports, and without more consistent standards across school boards, it may be difficult to judge.

Therefore, People for Education makes the following recommendations to better equip policy makers, schools and parents to work together to enable every child to experience school to their full potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

People for Education recommends the province:

• create a special education ombudsman office, and/or clarify whether the powers granted to Ontario’s ombudsman to hear complaints about school boards will include the capacity to act as a special education ombudsman for the province;

• consider expanding the dedicated funding streams for instances of extreme exceptionality to ensure that no child is unable to attend school for the full day due to a shortage of resources;

• monitor the impact of changes to the special education funding model, and develop a framework to support ongoing evaluation of special education services, which should include common definitions for a range of special education services; and

• standardize processes for assessment, identification and placement to provide adequate, timely and equitable services and access to education for every Ontario child.
Where not otherwise cited, the statistics in this report are from People for Education’s 17th annual survey of resources in Ontario elementary schools and 14th annual survey of secondary schools (2013–2014). The survey acts as an information tool for parents and Ontario citizens. It focuses on quantifiable resources available in schools across the province, tracking any changes that occur. The resulting data provide an annual picture of the effects of education policy and funding shifts. Copies of the surveys in English and French are available in the back of our Annual Report on Schools: http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/research/annual-report.

In October 2013, surveys were mailed to principals in every publicly funded school in Ontario. Surveys could also be completed online. Translated surveys were sent to French-language schools. Reminders were emailed in November and December. Confidentiality of all survey responses is guaranteed. Only aggregated school data are shared.

This year’s sample of 1,349 elementary and secondary schools equals 28% of the province’s schools. All of the province’s 72 school boards participated.

ANALYSES

The analyses in this report are based on both descriptive (such as frequency distribution) and inferential statistics (e.g., correlation, t-tests, analysis of variance). The descriptive statistical analysis is carried out to summarize and present numerical information in a manner that is illuminating and useful. In the few instances where inferential statistical analysis is used, it is to examine correlations and associations between variables and to compare means of different variables. The data in this study were analyzed using R and Stata.

REPORTING

Calculations have been rounded to the nearest whole number and therefore do not always add up to 100%. Student-to-staff ratios were calculated for schools that reported both the total number of students and the full-time equivalent for staff positions. The student-to-staff ratio for the province is the mean of the distribution of the student-to-staff ratios of reporting schools.

Comments from principals are used to enhance, elaborate or explain the quantitative results and broaden the issues discussed and explored in the report.

Schools were sorted according to their postal codes into geographic regions. For the most part, the distribution of respondent schools is representative of their distribution in Ontario.

OTHER PROVINCIAL DATA

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) generously shared its data with People for Education. EQAO’s demographic data are based on an analysis of the Statistics Canada 2006 census. EQAO also provided People for Education with data showing the percentage, per school, of students with IEPs and particular exceptionalities based on data provided by schools for the purposes of provincial assessments. People for Education combined our school survey data with EQAO’s demographic data on a school-by-school basis. We integrated the demographic information into our own elementary and secondary school survey data to examine patterns of families’ private assessment use based on average family income.


3. Email from Barry Finlay, Director of Special Education Programs and Services, Government of Ontario. April 8, 2014 on file with People for Education.


5. See almost identical comments from elementary school, Huron Perth DSB; see also elementary school, CSDEC de Nouvel Ontario.


7. Elementary school, Algoma DSB; elementary school, Thames Valley DSB; elementary school Simcoe Muskoka DSB; elementary school, Lambton Kent DSB.


9. Elementary school, Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB.

10. Elementary school, Simcoe County DSB.

11. Elementary school, Rainbow DSB.

12. Elementary school, Upper Canada DSB; elementary school, Lambton Kent DSB.


15. Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c.E-2, s.21(1) and (2), s.265.

16. Education Act, s.265(1)(m).

17. See e.g. Elementary schools, Halton DSB; Hamilton-Wentworth DSB; Durham DSB; Nipissing Parry Sound CDSB.

18. Elementary school, Lambton Kent DSB

19. Elementary school, Toronto DSB

20. Elementary school, Wellington Catholic DSB.

21. Elementary school, Rainy River DSB.

22. Secondary school, Ottawa-Carleton DSB.

23. Elementary school, Peel DSB.

24. Elementary School, Lambton Kent DSB.

25. Secondary school, Prince Edward Victoria Northumberland Catholic DSB.


27. Ibid.


30. Elementary school, Waterloo Region DSB.

31. Elementary school, Algonquin and Lakeshore DSB.

32. Elementary school, Waterloo Catholic DSB.


35. Ministry of Education, see note 8.
This report was produced with support from The Atkinson Charitable Foundation, MITACS Accelerate, and the contributions of citizens across Ontario.