



Fulfilling the Promise

Ensuring Success for Students with Special Needs



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Preface

In preparation for this position paper, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) held focus groups and discussions across Ontario to determine the state of special education in the province's public elementary schools. Teachers, parents, community representatives, and administrators shared their experiences and knowledge. This information from the people who deal directly with students with special needs proved invaluable.

Fulfilling the Promise reflects their input and the voices of our members across the province. ETFO wishes to thank all the people who contributed their time and expertise.



ETFO's Vision for Special Education

ETFO believes that all children deserve a high-quality education that recognizes their diverse needs and abilities. This is also our vision for special education in Ontario.

Who is entitled to special education?

ETFO believes that all children in Ontario are entitled to public education that's appropriate for their particular needs. The Federation and its members advocate on behalf of all students, including those with special needs. ETFO believes that society has a responsibility to ensure appropriate services and programs for students with special needs.

David Rose and Anne Meyer recently observed that “one of the clearest and most important revelations stemming from brain research is that there are no ‘regular’ students” (2002; p. 38). In a profound sense, every student can be considered “special” because every student possesses unique strengths and faces individual challenges. Certain students, however, have learning needs that require special education methods and contexts.

A caring society provides education for all children. It follows that their needs cannot be met by a one-size-fits-all philosophy or approach:

“if the stakes were not so great, it might be easy to laugh at the simplistic idea that one size fits all ... those who advocate for the needs of special education students aren't laughing” (McDermott & McDermott, 2002; p. 544).

Financial resources must be provided to ensure the existence of and access to special and compensatory programs that accommodate the needs of all students. Current processes and years of underfunding education have, however, left many students at risk. In these difficult times, teachers are struggling with diminished resources to provide the necessary supports and programs that are in the best interests of their students.

Programs for special needs students benefit us all.

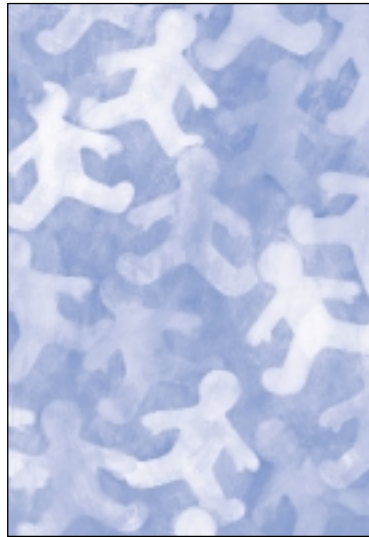
– ETFO member, *From the Ground Up*, 2001

Who are special education students?

Ontario's *Education Act* defines an exceptional student as one “whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special



education program.” Not all students receiving special education programs or services, however, are formally identified through the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process. Teachers, school administrators, and parents employ a number of measures to carefully evaluate individual students’ challenges and requirements when determining whether special education placement is right for them.



reality” (Rose & Meyer, 2002; p. 38). Understanding and appreciating individual differences is key to successfully identifying and assisting students with special needs.

At the present time, over 10 percent of elementary students in Canada are enrolled in special education programs. Of those students, over 50 percent have

Determining a child’s suitability for special education takes time and careful consideration. Because each student is unique, no universal templates or formulas can be applied: “the notion of broad categories of learners – smart, not smart, disabled, not disabled, regular, not regular – is a gross oversimplification that does not reflect

learning disabilities, 23 percent have emotional and behavioural difficulties, and 6 percent have challenges with the language spoken at school (Lipps & Bohatyretz, 2000). In Ontario’s publicly funded schools approximately 260,000 students receive special education programs and services – that’s about 12.5 percent of the total student body (Provincial Auditor of Ontario, 2001; p. 125).



The Issues

Meeting students' needs

Individual differences

Parents and I work very hard together to find the best strategies and support for their children. But the bottom line is that due to a lack of financial support, it's often a source of frustration and disappointment for all of us.

– Special education teacher, self-contained class

Children are unique and their needs rarely fit a neat prescription. Children of all abilities develop at different rates in a myriad of areas – intellectual, social, physical, and emotional. Growth must be nurtured in ways that value students' individual requirements and differences. As Elliot Eisner observes, “*The kind of schools we need would not hold as an ideal that all students get to the same destination at the same time ... The idea that getting everyone to the same place is a virtue really represents a limitation on our aspirations. It does not serve democratic purposes to treat everybody identically or to expect everyone to arrive at the same destination at the same time*” (2002; p. 580).

Placement

Ontario's school boards maintain a range of special education placements, including:

- placement in a regular class with support;
- placement in a regular class with withdrawal support;
- placement in a special education class with partial integration in regular classes; and
- placement in a special education class for the entire school day.

We know, however, that many students do not have access to the full range of opportunities. Special education placements, programs, and resources are not as readily available as they once were. School boards are not always able to maintain accessibility to the full range of placements.

Those that are available are limited and rarely offer the most enabling environments for learning. Adding to the complexity, parents and teachers have little control over placement decisions because available funding is often the criterion that dictates placement.

Integration

The Ministry of Education's current policy favours the integration of special needs students. In 2000, almost 80 percent of students with special needs were in regular classes for at least part of the day.

Integration has become a significant issue for Ontario's teachers. Difficulties related to integration were highlighted in every focus group



we conducted. Time and again we heard that too many students with special needs are placed in regular classes that are already too large. In many cases, no support is available for these students or their teachers.

Officials from the Ontario Provincial Auditor's Office visited a number of schools in four school boards while preparing their 2001

Annual Report. In the report, they noted that in classes of 25 to 30 students, 30 percent had Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

One school had 11 students with IEPs in a grade 3 class of 30, and 13 students with IEPs in a grade 2 class of 30.

The 2002 ETFO members survey found that, on average, classroom

teachers have 5.9 students with special needs. Only 14 percent of ETFO members reported having no students with special needs. Teachers of grade 7 and 8 classes had the highest average – 10 students with special needs in their classrooms.

Ontario teachers are not alone in their concern over integration in a climate of reduced support. The Nova Scotia Teachers Union (2002) recently called for its provincial government to put more resources into educating children with special needs: "Teachers will not be withdrawing support for special education students in their classrooms. Teachers overwhelmingly support inclusion of special needs students in the regular classroom but if government will not commit the

necessary resources, then no student is being served by the current policy." A recent survey by the BC Teachers' Federation similarly found that its members support the philosophy of inclusion, but overwhelmingly view the implementation as difficult (Naylor, 2002).

Appropriate placement decisions require collaborative decision-making between parents and teachers, administrators, and other relevant professionals. Currently, inadequate funding makes it impossible for these decision-makers to consider the full range of options. While regular classroom placement is the goal of integration, it is not necessarily the only or best placement option for all students at every stage of their education. In addition to unsatisfactory learning conditions, inappropriate placement can result in unsafe conditions for students and school personnel. School and board policies should be written and implemented to ensure the health and safety of all students and staff when integration of special education students takes place.

There is a lack of support for "inclusion." I have a grade 5 class with 26 students – one with Tourette's, one borderline learning disabled (LD), two with severe learning disabilities, four very low academic students, two with severe behavioural problems. I have no education assistant and the students who need close monitoring to complete tasks or stay on task are often left until I can get to help them. They are sometimes waiting a long time.

– Regular classroom teacher, grade 5

I believe in integration, but integration without support just doesn't work.

– Special education resource teacher, primary junior school



Parents

Parents, teachers, and schools want to work together to provide the most appropriate programs and placements for students. The current situation, though, puts parents and schools in a difficult position.

Parents must often aggressively seek support from all sectors of the health care community in order to obtain (often at their own expense) the documentation required to prove that their children meet the criteria for special education programs and services. Parents often find themselves spending inordinate amounts of time and energy collecting evidence to help schools get the assistance their children deserve. Not all parents have the time or resources to conduct this kind of information-gathering and advocacy. In addition, parents are often confused and feel betrayed because support previously provided has been withdrawn with little or no recognition of what their children continue to need.

As a teacher my heart goes out to parents who only want the best for their children and are constantly told by the board and community agencies that meeting kids' needs isn't affordable.

– Behaviour class teacher

ETFO believes that students with special needs cannot be best served with only one model. The most enabling environment involves a range of placements from special classes to full integration. All options must be viable and fully supported.

ETFO Policy: That public education in Ontario be based on a commitment to students, parents, and teachers that supports the intellectual, social, physical, and emotional development of each child in the most enabling environment.

Required Action: The provincial government must ensure that all students with special needs have access to the full range of programs and services that meet their needs, from full withdrawal to full integration.

Equity and special education

All students, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, culture, or socio-economic level, deserve access to a high-quality education. It seems, however, that these factors impact on who is identified for special education programs. Being male, living in poverty, and belonging to an ethnic or racial minority increases the likelihood that a student will end up in a special education program.

English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD)*

The Ministry of Education's current funding formula places English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development students at a disadvantage, even though these individuals are not traditionally considered special education students. This situation has an impact on special education services. In Ontario, funding for

*The Ministry of Education has changed the designation from English Skills Development (ESD) to English Literacy Development (ELD). The Student-Focused Funding Technical Paper for 2002-03 still refers to ESL/ESD rather than the new ESL/ELD terminology.



ESL/ELD students is allocated for only three years. This limitation is especially troubling in light of the Ontario Ministry of Education's admission that fluency takes much longer:

“students may require from five to seven years to develop the ability to understand the academic language used in textbooks and to use English to express the increasingly complex and abstract concepts encountered in the higher grades” (2001a; p. 11).

ESL/ELD funding is provided based on a student's date of entry into Canada. There is no regard for students' age on arrival,

educational background, effects of personal trauma, level of first language literacy, stage of acculturation, previous exposure to English, language(s) spoken in the home, or presence of learning exceptionalities. These factors, however, strongly influence a person's ability to acquire a second language.

Students born in Ontario who don't speak English or French before entering school also face inadequate support. For those born in the province, the government allocates a total amount of money, but it is not based on a determination of actual student needs. School boards then access these funds based on the proportion of students they have who fall into this category. This process causes particular strain on boards with high requirements. In addition, funding only takes into account children aged 5 to 19 – students in junior kindergarten do not even enter the calculation.

Because of the three-year cut-off, many students lose ESL/ELD support too soon. Without adequate time to show their true abilities, many students are incorrectly placed into special education programs. As one ESL/ELD teacher explained, “We wouldn't need expensive remediation in later grades if monies were provided early in school to support language learning for these students.”

Poverty

Poverty continues to be a critical factor in students' success at school. The Ontario *Early Years Study* states “the highest proportion of children who are experiencing at least one serious learning or behavioural difficulty is in the lowest socio-economic group. Step-by-step, up the socio-economic ladder, there is a declining proportion of children who are having difficulties” (McCain & Mustard, 1999; p. 68). Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard point out, however, that because the largest population is in the middle-income group, the actual number of children with difficulties is highest in this income bracket.

Race and culture

Research in the US shows that African-American students are disproportionately placed in special education programs. The incidence rate cannot be explained by any factor other than race. There is also recent evidence that African-American students are more likely to be identified as having special needs when they are in a minority than when they represent a majority of students. This is particularly so when there are few black teachers. As one study concludes, “many public



schools, designed to serve white middle-class students, pose an additional challenge for minority students. White teachers, according to many researchers, often are untrained in recognizing and dealing with these differences or remain unaware of them. The result is that many teachers evaluate lack of progress or differences in learning among minorities as deficiencies. Minority students are compared against a standard model based on white, middle-class norms” (Ladner & Hammons, 2001; p. 107).

Gender

Boys traditionally have been more likely than girls to be identified as needing special education programs and services. Again, however, it is unclear whether this represents a difference in incidence or in identification. There is research that finds the incidence of reading disabilities is about the same in girls and boys. Boys, however, are more likely to be identified than girls, at least partly because of the behaviour displayed when difficulties are experienced (Lyon, 1996).

We know more about how the factors discussed above work in other jurisdictions. We now need to determine whether these trends are similar in Ontario, because failure to recognize diversity in the public education system directly affects special education. Before any equity can be brought to this situation, serious consideration must be given to the impact of language, socio-economic status, race, culture, and gender on students’ performance at school.

ETFO Policy: That Special Education decisions and programs for at-risk students consider the intersection of the elements of class, gender, race, culture, and language, as they impact on children’s learning, assessment and placement.

Required Action: The provincial government should commission a study in Ontario that explores the impact of class, gender, race, culture, and language on educational decisions and programs for students with special needs.

Required Action: The provincial government should ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided by school boards for ESL/ELD students.

Required Action: The provincial government should ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided for students disadvantaged by socio-economic status.

Class size

Classroom teachers have students with a tremendous variety of learning needs in their regular classrooms with little or no support.

– Regular classroom teacher, grade 4

We know that students do best in small classes. This is true for all students, including those with special needs. In small classes, it’s less likely that any student will be left behind.

Bill 160 amended the *Education Act* to place a limit on the board-wide average class size – 24 in the primary division, 24.5 for all of elementary, and 21 for secondary.† In addition, Regulation 298 of the *Education Act* specifies the maximum

†There is some variation at the secondary level to allow boards to expand to an average class size of 22.



class size for self-contained special education classes. Depending on the particular exceptionalities of the students, the maximum class sizes are as follows:

- 6 for students who are autistic;
- 8 for students who are emotionally disturbed;
- 10 for students who are blind, deaf, trainable retarded, or who have speech and language disorders;
- 12 for students who are hard of hearing, with limited vision, or have orthopaedic or other physical handicaps;
- 12 in the primary division and 16 in the junior and intermediate division for students who are educable retarded children;
- 16 for students with different exceptionalities; and
- 25 for students identified as gifted.

Average class sizes, however, mask class composition. Only 14 percent of ETFO classroom teachers do not have any students with special needs. On average, each ETFO classroom teacher has almost six students with special needs; the average in grade 7 and 8 classes is 10.

Class size guidelines should recognize students' varying needs. The ETFO *Model Teacher Agreement* advocates a weighting factor for calculating maximum class size:

- exceptional students (other than gifted) weighted as 2.5,
- gifted students weighted as 1.5,
- ESL/ELD students weighted as 2.5, and
- students requiring a wheelchair or other prosthetic device restricting mobility weighted as 4.0.

In addition, the *Model Teacher Agreement* proposes that classroom teachers be responsible for no more than two students designated as exceptional.

Class size is an issue ... special education teachers are overwhelmed and frustrated, we have starving libraries, there is a lack of computer/technology support, and no education assistants for needy kids who don't fit the tight veil of ISA formulas.

– Regular classroom teacher, grade 6

In the context of larger classes and students with special needs who are integrated without appropriate supports, teachers have found that IEP recommendations are difficult to implement. This has resulted in unreasonable expectations by parents and extreme frustration when those expectations are not met.

As a self-contained classroom teacher, I have seen the numbers in my class increase rapidly. Some special classes in our board have as many as 16 students enrolled. This is too many for their very specialized needs. The class size is not far from the average class size. How is it possible to deliver the kind of programs these students require under these circumstances?

– Special education teacher, self-contained class, primary junior school

ETFO Policy: That a reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio within classrooms where there are students with special needs be mandated and funded by the provincial government.

Required Action: The *Education Act* should be amended to include a weighting factor for students with special needs who are integrated into regular classrooms.



Required Action: The *Education Act* should be amended to ensure a maximum class size in elementary schools for a single-grade class:

- junior kindergarten 15,
- senior kindergarten 18,
- primary 20,
- junior 22, and
- intermediate 25.

For combined grades, the maximum class size should be:

- kindergarten 15,
- primary 20,
- junior 20, and
- intermediate 20.

Early intervention

Key elements of high-quality education programs are small class size, qualified teachers, sufficient support personnel, and parental involvement. For students with special needs, the goal of early programs should be prevention: “It is clear that the longer children with learning disabilities, at any level of severity, go without identification and intervention, the more difficult the task of remediation becomes and the harder it is for the children to respond” (Lyon, 1996; p. 59). Early intervention initiatives are fundamental to helping these students.

The Ministry of Education’s current funding formula does not adequately recognize the needs of the youngest students. The Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) portion of the Special Education Grant does allocate more money for primary students than for students at

other grade levels. However, with almost 40,000 students on waiting lists for special education assessment and programs, early intervention is often not a reality. The Provincial Auditor’s 2001 *Annual Report*, for instance, noted a student whose learning difficulties had been identified in the early years of elementary school, but who did not receive formal assessment or an IEP until secondary school.

The most vulnerable members of our society have been seriously disadvantaged, even prior to their entry into the school system. The reduction in preschool services offered by the Ministry of Community and Social Services and by the Ministry of



Health and Long-Term Care has increased special education pressures in the early grades. In January 2002, a complaint was filed with the Ontario Human Rights Commission regarding the cut-off of treatment at age 6 for services for autistic children.

Research indicates that providing intervention as early as possible offers the best chance for students with special needs to succeed: “most school districts do not identify children with learning disabilities until a child is reading well below grade level, generally in third or fourth grade. By this time the child has already experienced at least a few years of school failure and probably has experienced the common attendant problems of low self-esteem, diminished



motivation, and inadequate acquisition of the academic material covered by his classmates during the previous few years” (Lyon, 1996; p. 59).

The transition from preschool to public school is often difficult because less support is available. Identified children often leave daycare

settings that included several education assistants and enter kindergartens where no education assistant support exists.

They move from a staffing ratio of 8-to-1 for preschool daycare, to 12-to-1 in daycare for

kindergarten-aged children. In the school setting, meanwhile, the staffing ratio rises to 24-to-1.

Many other services, such as speech therapy, that children receive early on are not provided once they enter the school system. Intervention at this stage, however, can make a difference between a lifetime of successes or constant struggles with remediation and accommodation.

Professional support personnel provide specific intervention strategies necessary for student success. ETFO (2001a; p. 16) maintains that the professional support staff necessary to address the varying needs of students with special needs include:

- audiologists,
- speech therapists,
- physical therapists,
- psychologists,
- social workers,

- Braille transcribers and sign language interpreters,
- emotional and trauma counsellors,
- behavioural counsellors, and
- technicians for prosthetics and assistive devices.

ETFO Policy: That effective program options and supports, particularly early intervention initiatives, be provided for children at risk to ensure equitable opportunities for them to succeed.

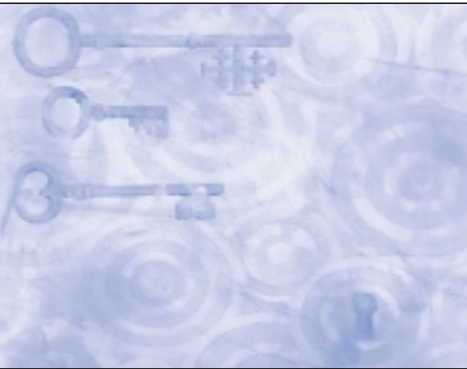
Required Action: The provincial government should provide access to intervention services for junior and senior kindergarten students with special needs as identified through the Early Identification Screening Process.

Required Action: The provincial government should ensure resources geared towards early intervention for students with special needs are available through community facilities and district school boards.

Coordination of services

Effective support requires the coordination of services available to students with special needs. School staff, professionals from outside agencies, and parents must work together to ensure that appropriate services are accessible by all who need them.

Time is an integral factor in ensuring that communication among the groups takes place and steps for action are clearly outlined. Attempts are made to coordinate services among relevant government ministries and community agencies.



However, this is always a challenge and success is evasive if sufficient resources are lacking. Providing time for meetings within the regular school day is crucial to attaining integrated delivery of services.

Message to the Minister of Education

Stop ignoring the needs of special education students. They have become disenfranchised. Children with learning problems often lack the financial resources and effective parental advocacy to draw attention to their dilemmas. In essence this presents a basic infringement of equity – the “average” students are given the opportunity to maximize their potential, whereas students with special needs often encounter lengthy waiting lists, lack of diagnosis, and are denied the opportunity to benefit from suitable educational programming. Where is the equity for them? What are the enduring social and emotional costs?

– Special education consultant

One special education resource teacher in a small school with a high special needs population explained: “there are nine different occupational therapists I deal with as the special education resource teacher. Then I wonder at the end of the day why I haven’t had time to work with the kids.”

Due to time constraints, classroom teachers are frequently left out of the loop in consultations with outside professionals. It thus falls to the resource teachers to liaise with all staff about outside professionals’ findings and suggestions. Sharing information in a timely fashion is difficult when little time is set aside for this purpose.

ETFO Policy: That Special Education services be coordinated to provide the best service delivery for children.

Required Action: Time should be allocated within the school day to provide for the coordination of services for students with special needs.

Required Action: Planning time should be provided within the school day to allow special education teachers and classroom teachers opportunities to share information and to design programs for students with special needs.

As a parent I feel frustrated that there are so many gaps. I often have to start from step one to explain what my child needs. There is a very real need for services to be coordinated.

– Parent of a child with special needs in grade 2

Resources and support services

Adequate support services, appropriate teaching and learning materials, and other resources such as adaptive devices and software are necessary to help students reach their full potential.

Only 30 percent of ETFO members who have at least one student with special needs stated that they have access to the support of an education assistant. Fifteen percent of ETFO members with at least one student with special needs were unable to identify any type of support (ETFO, 2002).



In October 2000 there were 14,000 education assistants employed by all school boards in Ontario. However, there were at least 25,000 students with high needs, the majority of whom

required education assistant support for at least part of the day. “Clearly, if much of the available teacher assistant time was needed to effectively support students with high needs, there was insufficient time available to provide needed support to the thousands of other students who required additional help to progress” (Provincial Auditor, 2001; p. 138).

Funding cutbacks have reduced options for school boards, eliminating many excellent innovative initiatives that were supportive and successful with high-risk students. Reductions in the number of educational support workers over the last four years have erected further barriers to successfully integrating some students and implementing special programs. As the Provincial Auditor noted, “service decisions are being made based on budgetary considerations, and there is no basis for either school boards or the Ministry to evaluate the appropriateness of the service cut-off points currently in place” (2001; p. 135).

Today, there are fewer services both in schools and in communities to help students in need, and these cutbacks affect students in many ways. One school board recently reported a 10 percent increase in student suspensions overall. About three-quarters of the students who are being

suspended have been identified through the IPRC process. With fewer resources and services, large class sizes, and fewer adults in schools, suspending students becomes a more tempting option. But it means that students with special needs are getting even less of the support they need to ensure their success in school.

Simply providing access to education assistants is not, however, sufficient. For children to receive the optimum benefit, there also needs to be ongoing dialogue and cooperation between specialists and teachers. This requires:

- cross-training for teachers and specialists in how to program for such students,
- staffing and timetabling to allow teachers and specialists to work as a team in the preparation of program plans, and
- opportunities during the school day to meet and review student progress and to make adjustments where necessary.

For integration to be successful there is a multitude of service requirements for students with special needs that vary from mild to severe. Students with mild to moderate difficulties have been the most negatively affected. Appropriate teaching materials and resources for these students, as well as for the “hard-to-serve” students, are difficult to locate and expensive to purchase. Inadequate resources and support personnel make it difficult to implement IEP goals. In addition, there are wide discrepancies across boards and schools in terms of teacher resources and materials.

Curriculum-related resources are often difficult to design or find for students with special



needs. In fact, the very nature of the present Ontario curriculum is problematic. Both the quantity of expectations and the nature of the concepts embedded in the expectations can create challenges for our most able students, while presenting insurmountable obstacles for students with special needs.

I am increasingly concerned about our students in today's Ontario. Our curriculum is too intensive for the average student in terms of the amount of information they are required to learn. Imagine, then, the problems that our learning disabled and slower learners face when confronted with this same curriculum. While we are, in theory, allowed to "modify" for the LD student, that modification may indeed place them at risk for graduation with a diploma from high school ... or affect their future employment.

– Special education teacher

Education assistants are critical for the delivery of programs to students with special needs in integrated classrooms. They bring knowledge and skills to their work with exceptional students. Educational support staff could help at an IPRC, but they are rarely included in this process.

One education assistant in a focus group explained the value of their input this way: "Decisions are made but the education assistant is not there. But then we are required to accept the recommendations and often deliver them. I think a buy-in is necessary for successful programming."

Adequate time for teachers to co-plan with education assistants is a vital component in providing effective programming for students with

special needs. Teachers are often expected, though, to find their own time to meet with specialists, plan with education assistants, and communicate with parents. Rarely is additional planning and review time allocated to teachers to make these responsibilities more manageable.

Special education teachers are experiencing a high degree of burnout. Consequently, this is becoming much less of a desirable teaching position. While expectations are higher, resources and support have been reduced. In many cases, teachers with the least experience are placed in the most difficult positions because others have simply had enough.

The ETFO Model Teacher Agreement states that "for each pupil awaiting placement or whose case is under appeal and where the teacher considers that the present learning situation is inadequate, a teacher's assistant shall be provided to assist the classroom teacher for not less than five hours per week" (2001b).

With proper support, resources, and training, the position of special education teacher can be once again an attractive and fulfilling choice.

We need to return to this model.

I'm not sure this is the job for me anymore. I used to feel I made a difference for special education students. Check the job vacancies advertised in the schools – teachers don't want the jobs anymore. There is little job satisfaction to know the students are really losing out.

– Special education resource teacher, JK-8 school



ETFO Policy: That sufficient quality resources, appropriate teaching materials, and a full range of support services and personnel be mandated and funded by the provincial government.

Required Action: The provincial government should provide release time for special education teachers to develop curriculum-related resources specifically geared towards students with special needs.

Required Action: The provincial government should ensure that the resources required by students with special needs who are integrated be allocated to schools and school boards.

Required Action: The provincial government should ensure that education assistants are provided for every student with special needs who requires this support.

Required Action: The Ministry of Education should strike a task force, with practising teachers as the majority of members, to review the curriculum expectations to determine if they are developmentally appropriate.

Required Action: Mentoring programs should be developed for teachers whose initial assignment is in special education.

Professional development

Educational staff must possess current knowledge of special education issues. Staying up to date is especially important given what appears to be an emergence of new and more prevalent syndromes and disorders. More in-depth training is necessary to understand these new conditions and how best

to address the needs of the students. In fact, several focus groups suggested that special education issues should be an integral component of every professional development opportunity. Such training would allow staff to acquire a wide range of skills and information.

Sometimes needs are identified throughout the year; however, there is no process in place to ensure that appropriate training to meet those new circumstances can occur. Providing accessible funding for school staff is one way to address this situation. The Federation believes that all parties concerned must place students' needs first and do away with the bureaucratic red tape that can prevent addressing issues in a timely manner.

A number of factors have combined to create a lack of special education-related professional development. The result is that teachers are not able to maintain currency on the latest developments in this area.

Bill 160 reduced the number of professional development days from nine to four. This has had an impact on the ability of district school boards to develop appropriate training programs for their staff. Cuts to the number of consultants and coordinators have also decreased special education professional development for both regular classroom teachers and special education teachers.

The government implemented the revised elementary curriculum very quickly, with limited supports available for teachers. Some school boards tried to compensate for this, devoting many resources to the traditional curriculum areas. Five years after the introduction of this curriculum, teachers are still being inserviced



regarding appropriate implementation strategies. Special education, though, often does not feature in this inservice.

There is an immediate need to access new resources, print, and software that address the wide scope of special education needs. Teachers and education assistants need training to use these resources effectively.

Occasional teachers are often forgotten in professional development planning and access. Yet occasional teachers are placed in classroom settings that include many students with special needs. Occasional teachers need professional development opportunities to ensure they have access to the latest information.

School administrators are crucial in ensuring that all staff working with students with special needs have the appropriate resources and time to coordinate their efforts. School administrators also need more professional development in this area.

Graduates entering the field of education require more in-depth training that includes a greater emphasis on special education and differentiated programming, including an understanding of how to modify programs to address individual needs.

ETFO Policy: That meaningful professional development related to Special Education be funded by the provincial government to support teachers and support personnel.

Required Action: The number of professional development days provided for teachers should be restored to nine per year.

Required Action: Teacher training programs should include a mandatory component of special education.

Required Action: Professional development opportunities relating to special education should be provided for occasional teachers.

Required Action: Professional development opportunities relating to special education should be provided for school administrators.

Funding and the Student Focused Funding Formula

In all of our discussions with teachers and parents, a central concern has been the underfunding of special education programs. Prior to the implementation of the new funding formula, school boards had the flexibility to design unique programs to meet students' diverse needs. ETFO believes special education programs should be fully funded at a level that reflects their actual cost, and that this funding should be readily accessible.

The truth is, education is underfunded.

– Phyllis Benedict (News release, Feb. 27, 2002)

I feel in a continuous state of flux caused by ever-changing ministry guidelines, unrealistic expectations, and the bureaucracy that accompanies it. The funding model has put special education students at high risk. The impact is not just for a year but for their life ... their future.

–Special education resource teacher, JK-8 school



The Ministry of Education introduced the Student Focused Funding Formula in 1998. It is made up of a number of components.

The Foundation Grant is intended to cover basic costs for all students, including those with special needs. For elementary students it provides funding for an average class size of 24.5. It also provides funding for professional and para-professional support on the basis of 1.33 staff per 1,000 students. Classroom consultants are funded on the basis of 0.48 per 1,000 students; teaching assistants are funded on the basis of 0.20 per 1,000 students. For 2002-03, the foundation grant provides \$3,680 per elementary student.‡

In addition, there are a number of special purpose grants and the pupil accommodation grant. Some of these grants are specific to special education. The Special Education Grant includes the following:

- **Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA).** This grant is allocated on the basis of a school board's total enrolment. In 2002-03, this grant generates \$500 per JK to grade 3 student, \$376 per grade 4 to 8 student, and \$243 per grade 9 to OAC student. This is 13.6 percent of the foundation grant for kindergarten to grade 3 students, and 10.2 percent for grade 4 to 8 students. No forms need to be completed to access this money, but it must be spent on special education programs. All students receiving special education programs must have an IEP, developed within 30 days of being placed in such programs.

- **Intensive Support Amount (ISA).** This grant is composed of four components: ISA 1 for specialized equipment; ISA 2 and 3 for students with very high needs; and ISA 4 for students in facilities such as hospitals, and detention and correctional facilities. There is also a **Special Incidence Portion (SIP)** intended to support ISA 3 students with exceptionally high needs. This portion requires the approval of the Ministry of Education district office. Specific criteria have been developed to access this funding for the full range of exceptionalities. It should be noted, however, that while individual student files are used to determine the allocation of this funding, the Ministry of Education states that the ISA funding is not allocated on a student-specific basis.

Other special purpose grants that relate to education for students with special needs include the Language Grant, Learning Opportunities Grant, Early Learning Grant, and Transportation Grant. While there is some flexibility in how most of the grants are used, Special Education Grants must be spent on special education.

There appear to be several grants that address the needs of students with special needs, but in reality these grants are insufficient to provide for the wide scope of needs within special education. In our schools, we find students with special needs who are neglected and disadvantaged because their needs do not fall within the government's narrow parameters.

‡ The foundation grant for secondary students is \$4,431.



The bottom line is that the current funding formula for special education is not working. School boards and staff strive to meet student needs but they are unable to do that because of the restrictive demands of government policy. Students are sometimes misplaced and lack adequate services or appropriate settings. Funding, rather than student needs, appears to be driving program placement for students with special needs in Ontario.

An education assistant warned recently that “children are falling through the cracks. There are simply not enough supports for those that need it.” An inflexible model leaves few options for school boards when it comes to providing the necessary financial supports for special education.

The ISA process and the criteria that come along with it leave many of my students without support. The funding formula forces kids into a model of learning that is not educationally sound. When something is not working for kids I can't understand how I can make it work at the school level.

– Special education resource teacher, JK-8 school

Access denied

The mechanics of the funding formula mask the various problems in special education funding in Ontario. School boards, teachers, administrators, and parents know that existing funding is insufficient to provide for the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Since the 1997 school year, public elementary schools have reported the loss of special education teachers and programs. ETFO's annual tracking survey documents these cuts:

Percentage of public elementary schools reporting a loss of special education programs and teachers

	1999-2000	2000-01	2001-02
Special education programs	12%	35%	31%
Special education teachers	9%	22%	20%

Source: ETFO, *ETFO School-Based Survey Reports (2000–2002)*

People for Education's latest survey (2002) found there are an estimated 39,700 children on waiting lists for special education services in elementary schools – a seven percent increase over last year. Over half are waiting for assessment, while some parents are paying up to \$1,700 for private assessments. This creates a two-tiered education system. People for Education also found that

- 12 percent of schools report no access to a board psychologist,
- 26 percent report no access to a board social worker, and
- 10 percent report no access to a board speech and language pathologist.

Paperwork that doesn't work

Excessive paperwork was ranked as one of the highest concerns among teachers in our focus groups across the province because it takes so much of their time away from direct work with students. In fact, the Council for Exceptional Children in the United States has identified paperwork as the number one reason teachers leave special education (Fine, 2002).

Teachers strongly oppose the manner in which funding is accessed. Too much time and energy is



expended in order to access inadequate funding. This situation is partly driven by the overall cut in funding for education. In order to provide programs for all students, boards need to access as much funding as possible. For students with special needs, this has come to mean filing labour-intensive forms to ensure some extra money.

The expectations of the Minister of Education and the

There is tremendous downloading to teachers and special education teachers. Continual increases in paperwork, case management duties, and administrative tasks consume my day.

– Special education resource teacher, K-6 school without a vice-principal

parents of Ontario with respect to special needs children has never been as high as they are now.

Yet with ever-increasing paperwork demands on resource teacher time, the reality is that there is a decreasing amount of time available for direct support to students. ...When teachers are producing one more report, writing one more IEP, filling in one more form, and creating one more ISA submission, they are not working side-by-side with a student to support

their learning or working in a classroom with a teacher and a group of students.

– Experienced special education resource teacher

The steps required to access much of the current special education funding have indeed become a bureaucratic nightmare. The Toronto District School Board processed 3,239 IPRC referrals during 2000-01, and conducted 21,761 IPRC reviews. Entire families of schools, including

their support personnel such as psychologists, consultants, special education resource teachers, speech and language pathologists, and behavioural specialists, find it necessary to stop doing their regular work in order to complete the ISA forms to access funds for special education. This task takes weeks and results in a significant amount of money being directed away from students. One mid-sized Greater Toronto Area (GTA) board estimated the cost to the board of processing and verifying ISA claims at \$500,000. This is money and time that should be spent on providing programs and services for students.

The Ministry of Education's *Individual Education Plans (IEP), Standards for Development, Program Planning and Implementation (2000a)* outlines unrealistic requirements when setting program goals for identified students. These standards, along with those found in the ministry's *Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans (2000b)*, have not been embraced consistently by district school boards or teachers, in part because most boards or schools do not have the required personnel to do the kind of tracking indicated in these documents.

An IEP should be a useful tool that reflects a manageable number of specific goals set for the student and should indicate what the teacher will do to help the student attain those goals. Only then can an IEP be a suitable teacher tool. In most cases, an IEP does not need to be reviewed in each reporting period – that is the role of the assessment for the report card itself. Less frequent reviews of IEPs would allow special education teachers to meet the needs of their students rather than bureaucratic paperwork requirements.



There are clear and straightforward ways to help alleviate the burden of paperwork, thereby allowing special education teachers to spend more time with the students they were hired to assist. The process for accessing funding should be streamlined, getting rid of complicated and rigid forms. We are pleased that the ministry has recognized some of this by now requiring only new files to be submitted. However, ETFO believes that more streamlining is necessary. Because the government's funding formula has meant a decrease in school support staff in most schools, more clerical assistance should be provided for special education teachers. In addition, effective technological supports should be purchased that would be appropriate for the work of special education teachers. While some software has been developed for special education teachers in Ontario, there is uneven access to this technology. A US study, meanwhile, found that special education teachers are often the last to receive computers and are often given hand-me-downs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002).

ETFO Policy: That Special Education programs be mandated and fully funded by the provincial government.

Required Action: The Ministry of Education should undertake a review of funding for special education programs and services.

Required Action: Access to special education funding should be simplified and allow flexibility to meet the wide range of students' needs.

Required Action: The Special Education Per Pupil Amount portion of the Special Education

Grant should be increased to 20 percent of the foundation grant for JK to grade 3 students and 12 percent of the foundation grant for grade 4 to 8 students.

Required Action: An Individual Education Plan should be a requirement for JK to grade 3 students in special education programs after 6 months in the program.

Required Action: Individual Education Plans should be reviewed once per year, rather than once per reporting period, and Identification, Placement and Review Committee decisions should be reviewed once per division, rather than once per year.

Required Action: The Ministry of Education should initiate a pilot project to investigate current practices that maximize technological and time-management skills regarding the required documentation for Intensive Support Amount funding, Identification, Placement and Review Committee identification, and Individual Education Plans.

Required Action: Appropriate technological and clerical supports should be provided to schools to assist with the completion of required documentation.

The guidelines for writing IEPs force me to use pejorative language focusing on students' weaknesses. That's not my style. I want my students to feel that they are moving ahead and to feel positive about their progress.

–Special education school resource teacher, middle school



Steps to Fulfilling the Promise

I want to spend time with students, not time with paper.

– Classroom teacher

Ensuring high-quality public education for students with special needs is a matter of priority, not ability. Ontario is a rich province with the resources to ensure this happens. We have outlined what students with special needs require, the barriers that exist, and the actions necessary to move to solutions. The Ontario government can implement these actions.

ETFO's Special Education Policy

ETFO's special education policy states:

40.0 Special Education – General

- 40.1 That Special Education programs be mandated and fully funded by the provincial government.
- 40.2 That public education in Ontario be based on a commitment to students, parents and teachers that supports the intellectual, social, physical, and emotional development of each child in the most enabling environment.
- 40.3 That effective program options and supports, particularly early intervention initiatives, be provided for children at risk to ensure equitable opportunities for them to succeed.
- 40.4 That Special Education decisions and programs for at-risk students consider the intersection of the elements of class, gender, race, culture, and language, as they impact on children's learning, assessment and placement.
- 40.5 That Special Education services be co-ordinated to provide the best delivery service for children.
- 40.6 That a reduction of the pupil-teacher ratio within classrooms where there are students with special needs be mandated by the provincial government.
- 40.7 That sufficient quality resources, appropriate teaching materials, and a full range of support services and personnel be mandated and funded by the provincial government.
- 40.8 That meaningful professional development related to Special Education be funded by the provincial government to support teachers and support personnel.



Conclusion



All children in our society must be valued for their unique characters and competencies. Students with differing abilities and needs must be welcomed into our schools and provided with the programs and services they require to flourish and contribute to society: “young people with disabilities can graduate

with the motivation to continue to learn ... They can be our police force, design our gardens, process our banking, and make the music we listen to. The possibilities are vast. But without a diploma and without self-esteem, none of these things will happen” (Holbrook, 2001; p. 785).

Funding must be improved to ensure that all children receive the programs and services they need – in both regular education and special education programs. Everyone, including the provincial government, recognizes that there are problems. Indeed, one of the mandates of the government’s Education Equality Task Force, which was set up to review the Student Focused Funding Formula, specifically addresses special education.

We live in a wealthy society. We can do better. As Kenneth Sirotnik, the director of the Institute for the Study of Educational Policy at

the University of Washington, argues, “Each child, adolescent, and young adult needs to be cared for in terms of intellectual, social, personal, and career-oriented educational needs – not to meet some arbitrary level of performance on an on-demand test, but to develop the ability and likelihood ‘to become’ (2002; p. 671).

ETFO believes that

- all children deserve a high quality education that recognizes the diverse needs and abilities of Ontario’s students;
- the highest quality of education for all citizens, irrespective of their needs or abilities, must be enshrined as a basic human right;
- students with special needs must have access to the programs and services needed to ensure that they can benefit from the education system;
- programs and services must be rich and varied to meet their individual needs, and provided in a timely manner; and
- financial resources must be provided to ensure special and compensatory programs to accommodate the needs of all students.

We must begin to truly value differences – in our classrooms and in our society. Our goals for education should include educating for real democracy, educating for diversity, educating for inclusion.



Summary of Actions

Access to programs

- The provincial government must ensure that all students with special needs have access to the full range of programs and services that meet their needs, from full withdrawal to full integration.

Equity

- The provincial government should commission a study in Ontario that explores the impact of class, gender, race, culture, and language on educational decisions and programs for students with special needs.

- The provincial government should ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided by schools boards for ESL/ELD students.

- The provincial government should ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided for students disadvantaged by socio-economic status.

Class size

- The *Education Act* should be amended to include a weighting factor for students with special needs who are integrated into regular classrooms.

- The *Education Act* should be amended to ensure a maximum class size in elementary schools for a single-grade class:

- junior kindergarten 15,
- senior kindergarten 18,
- primary 20,
- junior 22, and
- intermediate 25.

For combined grades the maximum class size should be:

- kindergarten 15, and
- primary to intermediate 20.

Early intervention

- The provincial government should provide access to intervention services for junior and senior kindergarten students with special needs as identified through the Early Identification Screening Process.

- The provincial government should ensure resources geared towards early intervention for students with special needs are available through community facilities and district school boards.

Coordination of services

- Time should be allocated within the school day to provide for the coordination of services for students with special needs.

- Planning time should be provided within the school day to allow special education teachers and classroom teachers opportunities to share information and design programs for students with special needs.



Resources and support services

- The provincial government should provide release time for special education teachers to develop curriculum-related resources specifically geared towards students with special needs.
- The provincial government should ensure that the resources required by students with special needs who are integrated be allocated to schools and school boards.
- The provincial government should ensure that education assistants are provided for every student with special needs who requires this support.
- The Ministry of Education should strike a task force with practising teachers as the majority of members, to review the curriculum expectations to determine if they are developmentally appropriate.
- Mentoring programs should be developed for teachers whose initial assignment is in special education.

Professional development

- The number of professional development days provided to teachers should be restored to nine per year.
- Teacher training programs should include a mandatory component on special education.
- Professional development opportunities relating to special education should be provided for occasional teachers.
- Professional development opportunities relating to special education should be provided for school administrators.

Funding

- The Ministry of Education should undertake a review of funding for special education programs and services.
- Access to special education funding should be simplified and allow flexibility to meet the wide range of students' needs.
- The Special Education Per Pupil Amount portion of the Special Education Grant should be increased to 20 percent of the foundation grant for JK to grade 3 students and 12 percent of the foundation grant for grade 4 to 8 students.
- An Individual Education Plan should be a requirement for JK to grade 3 students in special education programs after 6 months in the program.
- Individual Education Plans should be reviewed once per year, rather than once per reporting period, and Identification, Placement and Review Committee decisions should be reviewed once per division, rather than once per year.
- The Ministry of Education should initiate a pilot project to investigate current practices that maximize technological and time-management skills regarding the required documentation for Intensive Support Amount funding, Identification, Placement and Review Committee identification, and Individual Education Plans.
- Appropriate technological and clerical supports should be provided to schools to assist with the completion of required documentation.



Resources

Websites

The Adaptive Technology Resource Centre – www.utoronto.ca/atrc

The Association for Bright Children of Ontario – www.amtelecom.ca/~abc/

Autism Society of Ontario – www.autismsociety.on.ca

Canadian Down Syndrome Society – www.cdss.ca

Canadian Dyslexia Association – www.dyslexiaassociation.ca

Canadian National Institute for the Blind – www.cnib.ca

Council for Exceptional Children – www.cec.sped.org

Down Syndrome Association of Toronto – www.dsat.ca

The Easter Seal Society of Ontario – www.easterseals.org

Epilepsy Toronto – www.epilepsytoronto.org

Inclusion Press – www.inclusion.com

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario – www.ldao.on.ca

Ontario Association for Community Living – www.acl.on.ca

Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorder – www.cyberus.ca/~oafccd/

Ontario Brain Injury Association – www.obia.on.ca

SchoolNet – www.schoolnet.ca

Special Needs Opportunity Windows (SNOW) – snow.utoronto.ca

Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Ontario – www.sbhao.on.ca

Tourette Syndrome Foundation of Canada – www.tourette.ca

Voice for Hearing Impaired Children – www.voicefordeafkids.com



Glossary

Exceptional student: defined in the *Education Act* as one “whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program.” There are many distinctions within each category. For more details, see the Ministry of Education’s *Special Education: A Guide for Educators* (2001b) (www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/guide.html).

Foundation Grant: the part of the Student Focused Funding Formula that represents the per pupil amount allocated to each school board for general classroom support.

Identification, Placement and Review

Committee (IPRC): each school board must have an IPRC, made up of at least three people, one of whom must be a principal or supervisory officer. The role of the IPRC is to decide whether a student should be identified as exceptional, to decide the areas of the student’s exceptionality, to decide an appropriate placement for the student, and to review the identification and placement.

For more details, see Regulation 181/98, Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils (www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/identifi.html).

Individual Education Plan (IEP): a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. An IEP must be developed for all students identified as exceptional and to support an ISA funding claim. An IEP may be developed for a student not formally identified as exceptional but who is receiving special education services or who is in a special education program. See the Ministry of Education’s *Individual Education Plans, Standards for Development, Program Planning, and Implementation* (2000a) for more information (www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/iep/iep.html).

Integration: the policy of the Ministry of Education is to integrate students with special needs into regular classrooms as the first option.



Intensive Support Amount (ISA): the portion of the Special Education Grant that supports students with very high needs. Claim forms must be filled out for each student for whom the board is seeking support. There are four levels of ISA funding – ISA 1 for specialized equipment, ISA 2 and 3 for intensive staff supports, and ISA 4 for special education programs in facilities such as hospitals, children’s mental health centres, and detention facilities.

Placement: the way in which special education programs or services are provided to students. They include

- placement in a regular class with support provided in the classroom setting;
- placement in a regular class with withdrawal support;
- placement in a special education class with partial integration in regular classes; and
- placement in a special education class for the entire school day.

Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC): each school board is required to establish an SEAC, composed of parent association representatives, community representatives, and school board trustees. The SEAC advises the board on special education issues.

Special Education Grant: the part of the Student Focused Funding Formula that includes the Special Education Per Pupil Amount and the Intensive Support Amount.

Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA): the portion of the Special Education Grant allocated to all school boards based on total enrolment. No forms need to be filled out to access this portion of the grant.

Special Incidence Portion (SIP): part of ISA funding to support students with exceptionally high needs. This funding must be approved by the Minister of Education.

Student Focused Funding Formula: the method of allocating funding to each school board, introduced in 1998. The formula is composed of a Foundation Grant, 10 special purpose grants, and a Pupil Accommodation Grant. For more details, see Student Focused Funding on the Ministry of Education website (www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/index.html).



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