

PROMISES UNFULFILLED

Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario

Chapter 2 Summary

All children deserve a high-quality education that recognizes their diverse needs and abilities. For decades, ETFO has advocated for Ontario's education system to mandate and fully fund the supports and programs necessary to make this goal a reality for children with disabilities.

Ensuring all Ontarians thrive is essential for the economic and social health of the province. That support begins in elementary school. The unfortunate reality is that educators and families are faced

with a broken system that is failing our children on a daily basis.

Promises Unfulfilled explores the ongoing history, broken policy, and chronic underfunding that have led to today's classroom challenges. The 27 recommendations included in this report are based on research, statistics, expert analysis, and input from educators directly impacted by the current reality and complexities in our schools.

Ontario Special Education Policy

Ontario special education policy is outlined in the Ministry of Education document [Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide \(2017\)](#). It must be noted that the policy provides district school boards with autonomy and flexibility to meet the requirements within their publicly available special education plans. As a result, there is significant variability in special education support for students across Ontario.

Despite Ontario special education policies and plans, over the last two decades, the role of district school boards has transitioned from one of enabling access to needed services to one of gatekeeping and rationing scarce resources.

“Special education services are totally lacking. Kids are on wait lists for two plus years to get services they absolutely require. The system is so broken.”

*– Regular Classroom Teacher, 2024
ETFO special education focus groups*

Ontario special education policy's reputation of being broken begins with the name itself. Terms such as "special education," "special needs," and "exceptionality" have been described as out of date, patronizing, and even discriminatory terms that create barriers for the education system to effectively serve all children. The main special education processes and how they connected are summarized below, demonstrating how challenging it is for children, families, and educators to navigate special education in Ontario.

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

An IEP must be developed for each student who has been identified as exceptional or who is receiving special education programs and services without formal identification as exceptional.

Over 75% of ETFO's permanent teachers write and average of eight IEPs per year, resulting in approximately 60 additional hours of afterschool and weekend work.

Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)

Legislation requires every district school board to establish a special education advisory committee (SEAC) that makes recommendations to the board on the establishment, development, and delivery of special education programs and services. Some boards include ETFO locals as non-voting association representatives, which helps bring educators' perspectives on classroom realities to the conversation.

Welcoming and Inclusive Classrooms

Teachers use their professional judgement and collaboration with families, professionals, and other educators to assess a student's strengths and challenges and determine whether an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is needed.

Class size

All students do best in small classes, including those with special needs, where they are more likely to feel welcomed, nurtured, and included.

ETFO recommends class caps of 26 in Kindergarten; 24 in grades 4 to 8; and maintaining the existing cap of 20 in grades 1 to 3.

Identification

Ontario's *Education Act* defines an exceptional student as one "whose behaviour, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program." There are 12 specific exceptionalities defined by the [Ministry of Education](#).

There is also room for district school boards to individually interpret the ministry-defined criteria, resulting in variances across the province.

Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC)

An IPRC meeting is the process school boards follow when identifying and placing exceptional pupils, as set out in Regulation 181/98.

The declining number of IPRC meetings over the last decade should be seen as a decline in guaranteed special education support.

IPRC Statement of Decision

The IPRC will provide a written statement of decision following the meeting indicating the identified exceptionality, the classroom placement, and special education services and supports that will be provided.

Placement

The IPRC determines the placement of exceptional students. Before the IPRC considers placement in a special education class, it must first consider placement in a regular class with appropriate special education services. These include indirect support, resource assistance, or withdrawal assistance.

Conclusion

For too long, ETFO has sounded the alarm about the state of special education in Ontario. After years of funding cuts and policy changes by successive provincial governments, school boards simply do not have the ability to provide children with disabilities in this province with the supports, resources, and programs they need to succeed. The system is fundamentally broken.

Children with diverse abilities and needs must be welcomed and embraced in our schools. We must begin to truly value differences – in our classrooms and in our society. The whole child must be considered to ensure we are creating the most responsive educational environments.

ETFO urges the Ontario government to adopt our 27 recommendations – to appropriately fund our education system to provide a full range of student supports and ensure schools are designed to nurture authentic community so that all children have a full and valued presence within their classrooms.



To read the *Promises Unfulfilled* materials, including the full report, please visit etfo.ca



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