

PROMISES UNFULFILLED

Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario

Chapter 3 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.

Special Education Funding in Ontario

This chapter is written by *Ricardo Tranjan, senior researcher, and Caroline Aragão, researcher, from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.*

Since the Doug Ford Conservative government came to power in 2018, funding for school boards has dropped a stunning [\\$1,500 per student](#), on average, when adjusted for inflation. Currently, only 13 per cent of special education funding is based on assessed student needs; the remainder is based on general enrolment and a statistical model that tries to predict the likelihood of children requiring special education support.

By funding special education based on general enrolment and statistical estimates, the Ministry of Education abdicates responsibility for adequate programming. Boards and schools are forced to focus on rationing resources rather than meeting the needs of children with disabilities.

The current special education funding model

The administration of special education resources has grown more complex over the years, largely due to the addition of small funding envelopes that try to address the most obvious funding gaps. Each envelope has a separate set of eligibility and reporting rules, increasing the administrative burden on district school boards, schools, and education workers. An overcomplicated funding model also decreases government transparency and, more importantly, thwarts advocacy efforts because educators and parents cannot always keep up with the ever-changing technical terms.

For the 2024–25 school year, special education funding is distributed through four major allocations:

Allocation name	Amount (\$ millions)	Allocation criteria	Share of funding
Per-pupil Allocation	\$1,870	general enrolment	50%
Differentiated Needs Allocation	\$1,380	modelled needs	37%
Complex Supports Allocation	\$330.2	known needs	9%
Specialized Equipment Allocation	\$134.1	known needs	4%
Total	\$3,710		

Source: Ontario Ministry of Education, [Guide to the 2024–2025 Special Education Fund](#)

What underfunding looks like in practice

In 2022–23, the last year this data is available, school boards received an estimated \$4,200 in Differentiated Special Needs Allocation (DSENA) per student with special education needs. This was the second-largest funding envelope and the one meant to cover all students with special education needs. In practice, this amount translated to very little day-to-day support, for example:

- Classroom teacher: 1 hour and 30 minutes per week, or
- Educational assistant: 2 hours and 30 minutes per week, or
- Specialists: between 1 hour and 1 hour and 30 minutes per week

Usually, these allocations do not translate into one-to-one appointments with these professionals. For example, 2 hours and 30 minutes with an educational assistant means that the classroom teacher of a regular class with three children with special education needs would have an educational assistant once a week. The other four days of the week, the teacher is alone in the classroom, with a class average of 24.5 for grades 4 to 8.

The inadequacy of Ontario's special education funding model is also evident in the overall number of dedicated special education staff per student with special education needs. On average, English public school boards in Ontario have one special education teacher for every 23 children with special education needs, one educational assistant for every 10 children with special education needs, and one other staff, including specialists, for every 60 children who require special education assistance.

Fixing the special education funding formula

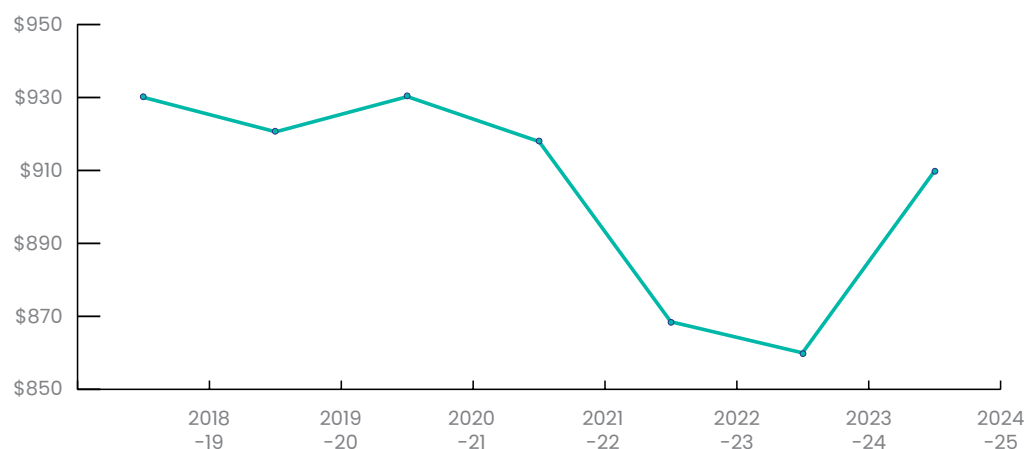
There are three simple ways to improve the funding formula used in Ontario to help close the gaps between the existing programs and the needed supports:

- 1. Index special education funding to inflation.** Special education funding has decreased over the last seven years in inflation-adjusted terms.
- 2. Address the assessment backlog.** Fifty-nine per cent of children receiving special education support have not been assessed by an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process. IPRCs are critical in supporting students by determining their areas of exceptionality and recommending appropriate educational placement and support.
- 3. Enhance the statistical model.** The model could be changed to yield more accurate predictions. The current design uses insufficient and out-of-date data.

While these immediate fixes would positively impact students with special education needs, they won't address the fundamental problems with the funding formula.

An adequate funding model would be based on assessed needs rather than estimations. That's the actual fix.

Figure 1.
Special Education
Per-Pupil Amount
(SEPPA), grades
4 to 8, inflation-
adjusted, 2015-16
to 2024-25 (\$)



Source: Ministry of Education, *Education Funding Technical Papers, 2018-19 to 2024-25*; calculations by the authors.

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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