

# PROMISES UNFULFILLED

## Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario

### Chapter 1 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.

## The History of Special Education in Ontario

This chapter is written by *Jason Ellis, associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia and author of A Class by Themselves? The Origins of Special Education in Toronto and Beyond.*

Throughout its history, different people have wanted different things from special education. At its best, special education has served pupils and their families, but their interests have not always been front of mind.

The reforms that first brought special education into the school system over a hundred years ago are the same reforms whose legacies we contend with today.

**History reminds us that children with disabilities are not monolithic, and that special education serves young people best when it puts their interests first.**

# A Timeline of Special Education in Ontario

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Eugenicists and bureaucratic school reformers advocate for special education as a school reform.

**1910s**

Equity concerns lead to expanding special education and to advocacy for mainstreaming. Children with disabilities begin to have access to a continuum of services.

**1970s – 1980s**

**1930s – 1970s**

Special education is absorbed into Ontario's school system as an expression of equal educational opportunity for all.

**1978**

## **Bill 82**

All school boards must offer special education classes by 1985. IPRCs and appeals are introduced.

## **Mainstreaming**

Children with disabilities should be placed “with respect for parental wishes or preferences to the fullest extent possible.”

**1990s**

Supreme Court decision in *Moore v. British Columbia* establishes that “adequate” special education can be an inclusive placement or a separate one. Adequate special education is “the ramp” that enables children with disabilities to fulfil their right to educational benefits equal to those received by other students.

**2012**

**2000s**

## **Inclusion**

Ontario prepares teachers for universal design for learning and differentiated instruction to support inclusion. However, continuum of services is also retained.

**2020s**

Ontario’s inclusive education/continuum of services policy is special education’s widest mandate yet.

# Conclusion

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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](http://etfo.ca)



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