

PROMISES UNFULFILLED

Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario

Chapter 4 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.

Challenges in the Classroom

In fall 2024, ETFO commissioned Stratcom to conduct focus groups with ETFO members to better understand the impacts of more than two decades of harmful policy and funding decisions on the everyday realities of special education in Ontario classrooms.

Their feedback, along with information from previous member surveys, research, policy and legislation, and expert analysis included in this report, point to the fact that smaller class sizes, access to support and resources, and – above all – more funding are the most pressing needs to help fix special education.

Ontario's publicly funded public education system, for all its flaws, is a system worth fighting for. This is what ETFO educators do at school each and every day – their hard work and dedication results in a world-renowned education system for our children.

Lack of early Interventions



“We used to be able to identify in late Grade 1, early Grade 2, if we were lucky. And now basically we’re being told it will be Junior grades before anyone gets an identification.”

– Regular classroom teacher

No supports in the inclusion model



“Regular classroom teachers end up with really high-needs kids in classes of 30 – non-verbal kids, kids that have PICA and put everything in their mouths – I don’t know how they manage.”

– Special education teacher

Barriers to accessing programs



“It can take multiple years to identify a student and then to identify the type of appropriate placement. Now whether that placement is available for them or not is another question. And how do they decide who gets these classrooms and these placements? It’s a very large puzzle.”

– Regular classroom teacher



“We need more specialized classes for children, but instead my board is CLOSING these classes! Classrooms with specialized equipment, a different design, along with staff with specific training, lower student-to-staff ratios, et cetera, are what help children achieve success.”

– Regular classroom teacher



“We’re lacking in psychometrists and psychologists to do identifications. The pressure is on the parents to get those done privately and interpreted. Then that creates a two-tiered system.”

– Regular classroom teacher

Inequities for children with disabilities persist

Lack of special education supports for English language learners

Increased school violence because of unmet student needs

Limited resources and support services

Barriers to accessing programs

No supports in the inclusion model

Lack of early Interventions

– Regular classroom teacher with a special education background



Limited resources and support services



“Special education services in my school are overwhelmed. There’s just so many needs, and they can’t service them all. Everybody is so frustrated about it, and they feel like their hands are tied. Resources are spread so thin.”

– Regular classroom teacher

Increased school violence because of unmet student needs



“Violent behaviours are a form of communication. Our best intervention is prevention, and we can’t put strategies in place when there’s only one of us or not enough of us.”

– Special education teacher



“I have been scratched, had chairs thrown at me, I have been bitten, spat on, I have gotten punched in the face. I almost broke my arm chasing after children. I do these things because I want to protect children who are being violent, as well as the children around them.”

– Special education teacher

Lack of special education supports for English language learners



“We don’t have any tools or knowledge around how to detect learning disability in a student who’s coming as a multilingual or an ESL learner. That’s just something that eventually boards will have to figure out, because kids will fall through the cracks if we don’t have a system.”

– Regular classroom teacher

Inequities for children with disabilities persist



“There’s a financial barrier. Some parents are just trying to get them food for lunch. The cost of a psycho-ed assessment is prohibitive.”

– Regular classroom teacher



“Bottom line: the quality of programming for spec ed is severely compromised as the government makes more funding cuts. It is a disservice to children in Ontario.”

– Special education teacher

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



Join ETFO in making our schools accessible, welcoming, and inclusive. Visit BuildingBetterSchools.ca to learn how.

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