PROMISES UNFULFILLED

Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario

ETFO FEEO

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario Equity Statement

It is the goal of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario to work with others to create schools, communities, and a society free from all forms of individual and systemic discrimination. To further this goal, ETFO defines equity as fairness achieved through proactive measures, which results in equality, promotes diversity, and fosters respect and dignity for all.

ETFO's Equity Initiatives

ETFO is a union committed to social justice, equity, and inclusion. The Federation's commitment to these principles is reflected in the initiatives it has established as organizational priorities, such as: ETFO's multi-year strategy on anti-Black racism; two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning education; and addressing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues. ETFO establishes its understanding of these issues within an anti-oppressive framework. The Federation ensures its work incorporates the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, addresses individual and systemic inequities, and supports ETFO members as they strive for equity and social justice in their professional and personal lives. Using the anti-oppressive framework is one of the ways that ETFO is operationalizing its Equity Statement.

Definition of an Anti-Oppressive Framework

An anti-oppressive framework is the method and process in which we understand how systems of oppression such as colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism can result in individual discriminatory actions and structural/systemic inequalities for certain groups in society. Anti-oppressive practices and goals seek to recognize and dismantle such discriminatory actions and power imbalances. Anti-oppressive practices and this framework should seek to guide the Federation's work with an aim to identify strategies and solutions to deconstruct power and privilege in order to mitigate and address the systemic inequalities that often operate simultaneously and unconsciously at the individual, group, and institutional or union level.

ETFO Land Acknowledgment

In the Spirit of Truth and Reconciliation, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario acknowledges that we are gathered today on the customary and traditional lands of the Indigenous Peoples of this territory.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Special education is the recognized name for the educational processes responsible for the organizing, funding, and support of children with disabilities in Ontario schools and is inscribed in legislation and policy. It is important to note that **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. However, for the sake of clarity, the terms inscribed in legislation and policy are used throughout this report.

ETFO Human Rights Statement

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario is committed to:

- providing an environment for members that is free from harassment and discrimination at all provincial and local Federation sponsored activities;
- fostering the goodwill and trust necessary to protect the rights of all individuals within the organization;
- neither tolerating nor condoning behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of individuals or the integrity of relationships; and
- promoting mutual respect, understanding and co-operation as the basis of interaction among all members.

Harassment and discrimination on the basis of a prohibited ground are violations of the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and are illegal. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario will not tolerate any form of harassment or discrimination, as defined by the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, at provincial or local Federation sponsored activities.

ETFO FEEO

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PREFACE: RENEWING THE PROMISE

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

In 2002, ETFO released *Fulfilling the Promise: Ensuring Success for Students with Special Needs*, a position paper that summarized issues in special education caused by the policy and funding changes made by the Mike Harris Conservative government. Informed by input from classroom education workers, the paper included recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Education that would have supported the success of children with disabilities.

These recommendations were largely ignored.

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. Members from across the province, including special education teachers, special education resource/itinerant teachers, and mainstream classroom teachers whose classes include students with disabilities, participated in the sessions.

Their feedback confirmed that the challenges ETFO identified more than 20 years ago persist. In fact, many have worsened. Key findings included:

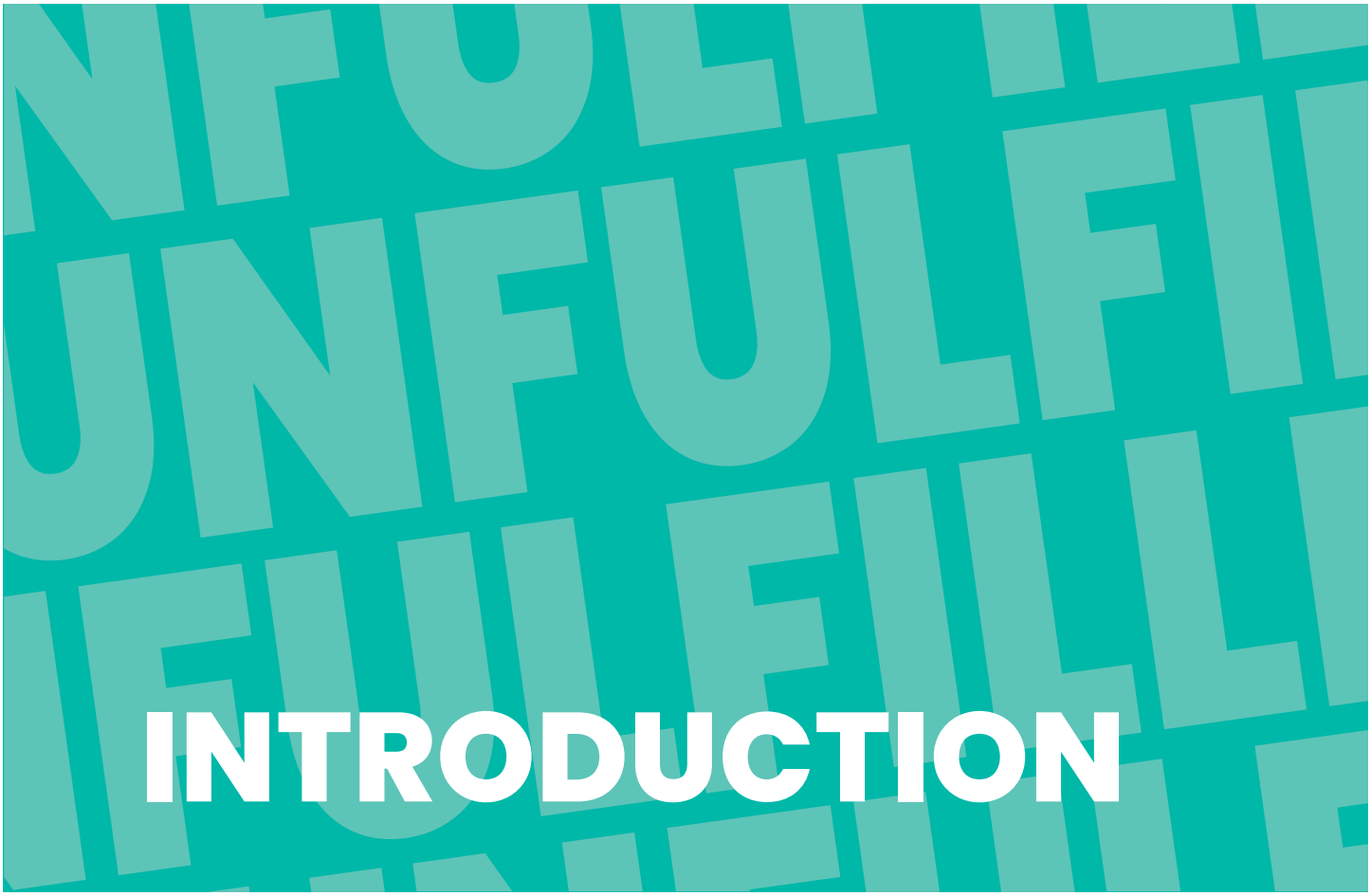
- Chronic underfunding over decades is making it increasingly difficult to attain positive learning outcomes for students with special education needs.
- Support services and resources for students with special education needs are severely lacking in Ontario's public schools.
- Special education services and supports have dwindled over the years as the number of students with exceptionalities and the complexity of students' needs have increased.
- Special education teachers and teachers in mainstream classrooms feel overwhelmed, deflated, discouraged, and personally blamed for an education system that is failing students with exceptionalities.
- As boards move towards a full-inclusion model and continue to close self-contained and small-group special education programs, services to support students with special education needs have been withdrawn from regular classrooms, leading to a sense of abandonment.

- Teachers in mainstream classrooms and special education resource teachers feel at a loss to effectively meet the academic needs of students with complex and multiple exceptionalities in their classrooms.
- Teachers are experiencing high rates of burnout, declining mental health, and are witnessing student frustrations manifest physically in their behaviours and violent outbursts in the classroom.

These findings echo those in several articles and reports issued over the past decade, which all point to the same conclusion, as noted in a recent article in online magazine *The Local* (Leung, 2024):

"Special education is in a state of crisis, currently serving neither the students it's meant to serve, nor anyone else. And one thing is clear: there's no fixing the broader public education system so long as students with disabilities are left behind."

Promises Unfulfilled identifies the challenges facing special education in Ontario based on ETFO's 2024 focus groups, member surveys, research, policy and legislation, and expert analysis. To understand where we are now, we must also examine how we got here. Chapters on the history of special education in the province, funding over time, and special education policy are included for context.



INTRODUCTION

The lack of support for Canadians with disabilities begins in elementary school

In her book *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*, Carla Shalaby argues that children with special education needs are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine of our school systems, alerting us to the ever-increasing poisons caused by the chronic underfunding of education. Research indicates that our canaries are in trouble, and have been for some time.

Almost a decade ago, Horizon Educational Consulting completed an online parent survey to document the systemic barriers and obstacles for families of children with disabilities (Horizon, 2016). In the resulting report, *Access to Special education in Ontario in a Social Justice Context* almost two thirds (58.9 per cent) of parents noted that their children tended to develop negative emotions related to school or school-related anxiety due to challenges in learning or stigmatization of their special learning needs, and 35.3 per cent of parents said that their child lost confidence

in their ability to succeed because of the effects of the inadequate funding of supports. The research also pointed to the growing issue of inequity, with almost 20 per cent of parents reporting that their family suffered financial stress due to the need to spend money so their children could access services and programs they needed to be successful in school.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission reports that 10 per cent of Canadians with disabilities are at the very least being forced to limit the scope of their educational choices and career paths and at worst are cutting their educations short or leaving education behind completely (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

These findings are also reflected in the report of the Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read inquiry, which specifically focused on children with dyslexia and other "reading disabilities." It notes many parents and children told the inquiry that stigma related to reading difficulties resulted in students experiencing, "depression, anxiety, school avoidance, acting out, being bullied, victimized, self-harming, and/or thinking about or even attempting suicide" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Most recently, the Ontario Autism Coalition (OAC) released the results of their 2023-24 special education survey, which gathered information from students and families accessing or trying to access special education in Ontario. The survey included questions about safety concerns, accommodations, academics, exclusions, the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process and outcomes.

Almost half (48 per cent) of responding families had elementary-aged students receiving special education support. The survey indicated that most families (82 per cent) reported at least one safety concern, with bullying (41 per cent) and elopement (40 per cent) being the most common. Other concerns included violence from other students or violence towards other students, and an increase in self-injurious behaviour.

The OAC survey confirms what we heard from ETFO members in our 2024 focus groups and the 2023 all-member violence survey: "While educators and school staff are working hard to support students, they are doing so within a framework of chronic underfunding and systemic neglect. School boards are left struggling to meet the complex needs of special education students without the resources to hire adequate staff, provide appropriate training, or implement necessary support" (Ontario Autism Coalition, 2025).

Our children grow up and their needs continue to be ignored

In 2005, the legislative assembly of Ontario enacted the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA). Its purpose was to improve accessibility for Ontarians with physical and mental disabilities to all public establishments by 2025. This promise has not been fulfilled.

AODA development committees are responsible for creating and maintaining the standards. The AODA Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Standards Committee submitted its final recommendations and report to the Ontario government in 2022 (K-12, 2022). The 225 recommendations have been largely ignored.

While the Ontario government ignores their own legislation and the AODA recommendations, statistics and news reports continue to highlight the escalating challenges faced by Canadians with disabilities:

- poorer educational outcomes
- increased unemployment
- lower income
- increased housing insecurity
- increased food insecurity
- higher rates of incarceration.

These realities reveal critical gaps in support, funding, and access to essential services.

Ontarians with disabilities must be welcomed and valued for their uniqueness and competencies. They need to be provided with supports, programs and services that allow them to flourish as contributing members of society. Ensuring all Ontarians thrive is essential for the economic and social health of the province. That support begins in elementary school.

ETFO recognizes that the practical implementation of special education is a complex web of history, policy, and funding that intersects with the diverse spectrum of student exceptionalities and learning needs within the classroom.

The 27 recommendations included in this report take all of these complexities into account while also demanding necessary change.

Our students deserve better, and it is incumbent upon our government and education system to ensure that **all** children in Ontario are provided with every tool and opportunity to fulfil their potential. It is beyond time for real change.

CHAPTER 1: THE HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

by Jason Ellis

Special education is not new. It has existed in Ontario for more than 100 years. There are lessons to learn from this history.

Over its century of existence, special education in the province has changed dramatically in response to activism, advocacy, and shifting school culture. Special education began as a school reform in the early 20th century, was absorbed into the school system in the pre- and post-war eras, was expanded and challenged in the 1970s, and has more recently become a hybrid of inclusive education and a continuum of services. These changes affected teachers' work and have shaped and been shaped by special education funding.

Throughout this history, people have exchanged views about the appropriate place to educate exceptional children: in different classrooms apart from other children, or in the same classrooms as others but with differentiated instruction. Parents, at first on their own and later together and helped by courts and *the Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, have tried to make special education serve their children's best interests.

This history teaches that individual needs matter, that parents should be listened to, that appropriate special education is a right, and that wide policy mandates require big funding.

Special education: A school reform, 1910–1930

Activist school reformers gave Ontario its first special education classes. Among these early reformers were eugenicists, who viewed special education classes as part of their wider efforts to control every aspect of the lives of children and adults with mild intellectual disabilities. Harsh as their ideas were, eugenicists were influential. They convinced one Ontario school board to open the province's very first special education classrooms in 1910 and they were instrumental in forming the province's early special education law, the 1914 *Auxiliary Classes Act* (Ellis, 2019).

Bureaucratic school reformers were another type of activist that contributed to early special education. They introduced a basic principle of special education as we know it: that schools should instruct children with disabilities separately from other children, in their own special education classrooms (Ellis, 2019).

Eugenics and bureaucratic school reforms met in the 1910s to create a school culture that approved of separating children by their supposedly natural and fixed abilities. "Nature has put the [disabled child] in a class by himself," one eugenicist wrote. "We had better take the hint" (as cited in Ellis, 2019).

Schools in this period did not consult parents about their children's best interests. Parents advocated alone, without the support of organizations.

By 1930, special education had spread across parts of Ontario, but there were still places and people it did not reach. Classes in 25 cities and 12 towns enrolled some 5,800 children, who could "now enjoy the advantages of special courses adapted to their particular needs" (Ontario, 1931). But, because the *Auxiliary Classes Act* did not require school boards to have special education classes, rural Ontario, which could not afford them, was unserved by special education (Amoss & DeLaporte, 1937). The 1914 act also prohibited children with diabilities with intelligence quotients (IQs) lower than 50 from attending even the special education classes it authorized. With this narrow mandate, the provincial government spent just $42,000 (equivalent to about $770,000 today) on special education in 1930 (Ontario, 1931).

Special education classes are absorbed into the system, 1930–1970

The commitment by 1930 to serve some exceptional children anticipated the significant shift in school culture that arrived after the Second World War. This culture embraced equal educational opportunity for all. Getting *all* children to school – even difficult-to-reach children, such as those with disabilities and rural children – and providing them with quality services defined the era (Gidney, 1999).

While special education classes had served mostly urban children to this point, as Ontario consolidated rural school boards, the new, larger units gained the greater financial capacity they needed to deliver modern special education to all corners of the province (Amoss & DeLaporte, 1937; Gidney, 1999).

However, the *Auxiliary Classes Act* still excluded children with intellectual disabilities from public school special education classrooms. Many were sent away to institutions, such as the Ontario Hospital School at Orillia[1] (Ellis, 2017; Pletsch, 1997; Simmons, 1982).

Starting in the late 1940s, parents founded a provincial advocacy group and organized private classes in their communities for children with intellectual disabilities who would otherwise be kept out of school. In 1969, Ontario passed a law transferring the private classes to public school boards. Children with intellectual disabilities were still kept separate and not integrated into regular classrooms, but now the public paid for their schooling (Pletsch, 1997).

[1] Later other parallel institutions opened and all of these institutions were known as "regional centres," including Huronia (Orillia), Rideau (Smiths Falls), and Southwestern (Blenheim).

Expanding and challenging special education, 1970–2000

There were two major tendencies in special education after 1970: expansion and mainstreaming. Received wisdom by this time was that the only problem with special education was that there was still not enough of it; there needed to be an expansion of classes and services. Advocates of mainstreaming, including social justice activists and parents, challenged the idea of separate classrooms.

"Increasingly," one historian has written about this period, "access to schooling per se was ceasing to be viewed as an adequate definition of equality of educational opportunity" (Gidney, 1999).

As the school culture shifted, targeted policies and resources to help the system's most marginalized children achieve greater "equality of outcome" with peers – the notion of equity – entered the scene (Gidney, 1999).

Equity principles supported demands for more special education classes, smaller special education class sizes, and greater support services. This widening mandate made special education expansion "the single most costly innovation of the 1970s" in the Ontario school system (Gidney, 1999).

Yet equity also shaped demands to place special education children in regular classrooms. "Integration" (or, today, "inclusion") is the movement to accommodate people with disabilities in the same spaces as everyone else. "Mainstreaming" is the name given to this in K–12 schools, specifically (Winzer, 2009). Arguing that segregation is inequitable because it leads to poorer outcomes, advocates presented mainstreaming as being in the child's best interest.

"We should no longer tolerate this segregation of many children," reads one influential national report from 1970. "We are convinced that the best interests of the child will be served only when we make a concerted effort to maintain for him the maximum degree of normality in all his life experiences" (Commission on Emotional and Learning Disorders in Children, 1970).

Bill 82

In 1978, the Ontario government announced the most significant new special education legislation since 1914's *Auxiliary Classes Act*. Bill 82 contributed in a big way to the expansion of special education after 1970. The bill replaced permissive clauses in the 1914 act that made it optional for school boards to operate special education classes with clauses that made providing such classes mandatory. School boards that did not offer special education – and there were still some that did not in 1978 – would have to begin supplying it by 1985 (Gidney, 1999).

Bill 82 also created due process rights for exceptional pupils and their parents. Among these, school boards had to form Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs). Parents also gained the right to appeal their child's special education identification (designation) and placement (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016). Within just a dozen years of Bill 82's passage, some 160,000 IPRCs were being conducted yearly in the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1992).

Mainstreaming

Though Bill 82 did not require mainstreaming, school boards mainstreamed anyway. The Toronto Board of Education, for example, implemented its "Continuum of Special Programs" policy (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016). In a continuum model, the greatest number of exceptional children is integrated into regular classrooms most of the time, attending segregated classrooms only some of the time. A smaller number of children attends the segregated special education classroom most of the time, or less occasionally all the time (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016). By 1990, two-thirds of Ontario's 156,000 special education pupils were in integrated settings most of the time (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1992).

Mainstreaming and the continuum of services changed teachers' jobs. No longer responsible for one special class, special education teachers became resource teachers who saw children with disabilities or learning difficulties rotating through their classrooms throughout the day for specialized instruction.

Regular classroom teachers' work changed as well; they were asked to adapt their instruction to meet mainstreamed special education pupils' needs. IPRCs gave all teachers new paperwork to complete (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1992).

Changes to special education and Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Bill 82's requirement that all eligible children be able to access special education, due process guarantees, and the emerging principle of a parent's right to choose a setting in their child's best interest all prepared Ontario special education for the 1982 *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which strengthened equality before the law and due process rights for all Canadians (Clément, 2016).

Section 15 of the Charter forbids discrimination on grounds of "mental or physical disability" (Charter, 1982). With Charter protections in place by the mid-1980s, tribunals, courts, and the Supreme Court of Canada now influenced special education policy. In the *Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education* case that reached the Supreme Court of Canada in 1996, and in other similar proceedings, parents successfully argued that they were the best judges of their children's best interests and received the mainstream placements they had demanded but that had been denied (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016; Pletsch, 1997).

The Ontario government responded to the changing legal landscape with new legislation and policies. These reoriented special education towards mainstreaming and closed loopholes boards had used since the 1914 Auxiliary Classes Act to exclude or segregate "hard-to-serve" children (Cooke, 1991; Education Law Statute Amendment Act, 1993; Pletsch, 1997). The new legislation and policies also communicated the government's intention to place all special needs children "with respect for parental wishes or preferences to the fullest extent possible" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1992).

Another special education court case that began in the 1990s would influence placement decisions, policies, and not least of all, how Section 15 Charter equality rights were interpreted for children with disabilities in educational contexts.

The events in *Moore v. British Columbia* started on the other side of the country in 1994 and did not conclude until the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on the case in 2012. Like the Eatons, the Moores challenged their school board's placement of their child. Unlike the Eatons, the Moores requested a separate special setting for their son Jeffrey to accommodate his dyslexia, which the school board denied. The Supreme Court of Canada sided with the Moores. The court found that the school board had discriminated when it denied the placement Jeffrey needed, violating his rights under Section 8 of the B.C. *Human Rights Code*, and, by extension, his Section 15 Charter right to equality.

The Moore case determined that "adequate" special education – that which provides equal educational benefit to children with special needs as to those without – can be integration, or not. For Jeffrey Moore, it was not. Whatever it may be in an individual's case, "adequate special education … is not a dispensable luxury," the Supreme Court said. "For those with severe learning disabilities, it is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to *all* children" (*Moore v. British Columbia,* 2012).

Inclusion and a continuum of services: 2000–present

By about 2000, inclusion had become a major part of a wider school culture in which equity and diversity are highly valued (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). In line with this, instead of treating exceptional children's differences as deficits to isolate or correct, inclusion treats them as unique characteristics to accept, and even to celebrate (Ellis & Axelrod, 2016).

In Ontario's inclusive schools, "the regular classroom [is] the placement of first choice" for exceptional pupils. Yet the province has also chosen to carry on offering "a range of placements" – the continuum of services – as options for some children, simultaneously with inclusion (Bennett & Wynne, 2006).

Ontario began getting teachers ready for this policy with an emphasis on universal design for learning and differentiated instruction (Bennett & Wynne, 2006; Bernard & Wade-Wooley, 2005). Differentiated instruction is a marked departure from the differentiated settings (separate classrooms) that the province first adopted over 100 years ago for special education.

"We get the message from our boards and the Ministry that we're never doing enough. Recently, our board did some PD on universal design because our board is going to be getting rid of specialized classrooms for children that are LD or MID. Universal design for learning is stuff that we've known for a long time, and we're [already] doing all of these things. But we are stuck in a system that is meant for us to fail, for children to fail."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

Lessons learned from the history of special education

Special education in Ontario has unfolded over four phases that included shifts in approach, attitude, theory, and delivery models. Across this history, activism and advocacy (often-parent led), and changing school culture (from exclusion to equity, rights and inclusion), have powered change. Teachers have absorbed the effects of these changes, most recently universal design for learning and differentiated instruction, which alter how they prepare, teach, assess and evaluate.

This history of special education teaches many valuable lessons. One is that there are as many individual sets of special needs as there are children identified as having special needs, about 350,000 children in Ontario today (Ontario, 2024). A range of placements, from inclusion to self-contained, are required to meet needs that are this diverse.

Another lesson is that special education has worked better when it has listened to parents, served children's best interests, and respected the rights of both.

Taken together, these lessons show us that the policy mandate is wider than ever and thus more expensive than ever. With that, the final lesson must be that, above all else, funding matters.

About Jason Ellis, Author of Chapter 1

Jason Ellis, PhD, is an 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*.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure a full range of responsive special education placements and supports that honour a child as a whole person are available in each district school board.

From Student to Teacher – ETFO Members with Disabilities

ETFO members with disabilities share their childhood educational experiences and their thoughts on special education in Ontario today.

Jayne is profoundly deaf and entered a general kindergarten class in 1976.

Jayne felt extremely lucky for the teachers she had. Her teachers wore large FM microphone systems that hung around their necks. Jayne's FM receiver, worn across her chest, was the size of a brick.

Jayne's teachers made every effort to ensure they were speaking clearly, repeated instructions, positioned themselves so that Jayne could easily lip read, and set up the classroom so that she could interact with both teachers and other children. The teachers were able to give Jayne the attention she needed.

Every day, Jayne was able to access 30 minutes of speech and language therapy in a classroom just down the hall. Jayne has not seen a similar level of service for profoundly deaf children since becoming an educator in 1998.

Though technology like FM systems and closed-captioning have improved, Jayne knows the complex bits and pieces of technology, large class sizes, more complicated special education process, and lack of support her students are confronted with now would have created a more challenging environment for her to navigate.

CHAPTER 2: SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY IN ONTARIO

Special education in Ontario has undergone dramatic shifts over the last century. It's important to understand this history, but it is even more important to consider where we are now, and the potential implications of current Ontario special education policies outlined in *Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide* (2017) on the future.

Ontario special education policy's reputation of being broken begins with the name itself. Terms such as "special education," "special needs," and "exceptionality" attempted to address disability stigma. However, critics argue these terms erase the experience and culture of disability from school and create barriers for the education system to effectively serve all children. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) K-12 Education Standards Development Committee received feedback during the development of their recommendations that these terms are out-of-date, patronizing, and even discriminatory.

Despite this controversy, these are the terms that appear in legislation and policy, and are in common usage. For clarity, ETFO has chosen to use the terms throughout this report, with the understanding that better alternatives may exist.

This chapter summarizes the main special education processes and highlights how their implementation, as outlined in district school board special education plans, creates significant variation across Ontario.

District school board special education plans

Since 2000, the Ontario Ministry of Education has required each district school board to prepare and submit a special education plan every two years.

The requirements for special education plans are governed by *O. Reg. 306 of the Education Act*. The plans must also comply with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, *Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide* (2017), and any other relevant legislation.

Legislation also requires that each school board have a special education advisory committee (SEAC). This body is comprised of board-appointed members from local associations (which may include parents), the school board, representatives of Indigenous communities, and may include additional members who do not belong to any of these groups.

Representatives of local associations share the perspectives of parents of children with a wide range of exceptionalities. It should be noted that it is not possible to include associations that represent every exceptionality, and SEAC members must recognize the inherent biases that may exist on committees.

Some district school boards include ETFO locals on the committees as non-voting association representatives. ETFO locals have strong connections to members in both regular and special education classes, and ETFO representatives bring the classroom realities to the conversation while supporting the use of an anti-oppressive lens in the committee's work.

The SEAC's responsibilities are:

- to make recommendations to the board on any matter affecting the establishment, development and delivery of special education programs and services for exceptional pupils
- to participate in the board's annual review of its special education plan
- to participate in the board's annual budget process as it relates to special education
- to review the financial statements of the board as they relate to special education

While the plans must be shared publicly to inform families about the special education supports and resources that are available within the board, many families struggle to understand the plans or how to advocate for their children with disabilities.

David Lepofsky, chair of the Toronto District School Board's Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) told the *Toronto Star* that, for eight years, the SEAC has been asking the TDSB to do a better job of communicating with parents about the special education services and supports that are available.

He noted that parents seeking information were advised to read the board's special education plan, a 244-page document he described as "a cure to insomnia" that is overly complex and hard to decipher. "It is not very useful, especially for families for whom English isn't their first language, and who don't know all the technical jargon edu-speak," Lepofsky told the *Star* (Teotonio, 2024).

District school boards have a great deal of autonomy and flexibility to meet the requirements within their special education plans. As a result, there is significant variability in special education support for children across Ontario.

Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC)

An Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) meeting is the process school boards follow to identify and determine placements for exceptional pupils, as set out in *O. Reg. 181/98 of the Education Act*. Under the legislation, an IPRC must be held if the parent/guardian makes a written request for one. A principal may also request an IPRC meeting.

An IPRC is composed of at least three people, one of whom must be a principal or supervisory officer of the board. The other two members are often the classroom teacher, special education teacher, or school board staff such as a consultant.

Many steps occur prior to deciding to have an IPRC meeting for a student. Typically, the classroom teacher, special education teacher, support staff, and other professionals have worked together to determine the strengths and needs of the student, and to provide appropriate programming based on this information. Eventually, the school or parents may decide to request an IPRC. It is inappropriate to withhold required services from a student while they wait for an IPRC meeting.

Following the IPRC meeting, the committee will issue a written statement of decision that will:

- state whether the IPRC has identified the student as exceptional
- indicate, where the IPRC has identified the student as exceptional
    - the categories and definitions of any exceptionalities identified

  - the IPRC's description of the student's strengths and needs
  - the IPRC's placement decision
  - the IPRC's recommendations regarding a special education program and special education services, if any
- provide reasons for placing the student in a special education class, where that is the IPRC's decision

If a student has been identified as exceptional through the IPRC process, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) must be created and be in place within 30 school days of the IPRC.

The identification continues to apply to the student as they progress through school, but the identification and placement decisions must be reviewed annually. An additional IPRC meeting must be convened if it is determined there is a need to change the identification of the student.

If the parents/guardians disagree with the decisions of the IPRC, there is an appeal process they can follow, as outlined in *O. Reg. 181/98*.

A student does not have to be deemed exceptional through the IPRC process to receive special education programs or services at the elementary or secondary level. In such cases the special education programs and services the student receives are documented in the IEP.

Data collected by ETFO over the past decade indicates that while the number of children requiring special education programs or services has increased, the number of IPRCs has gone down during the same period.

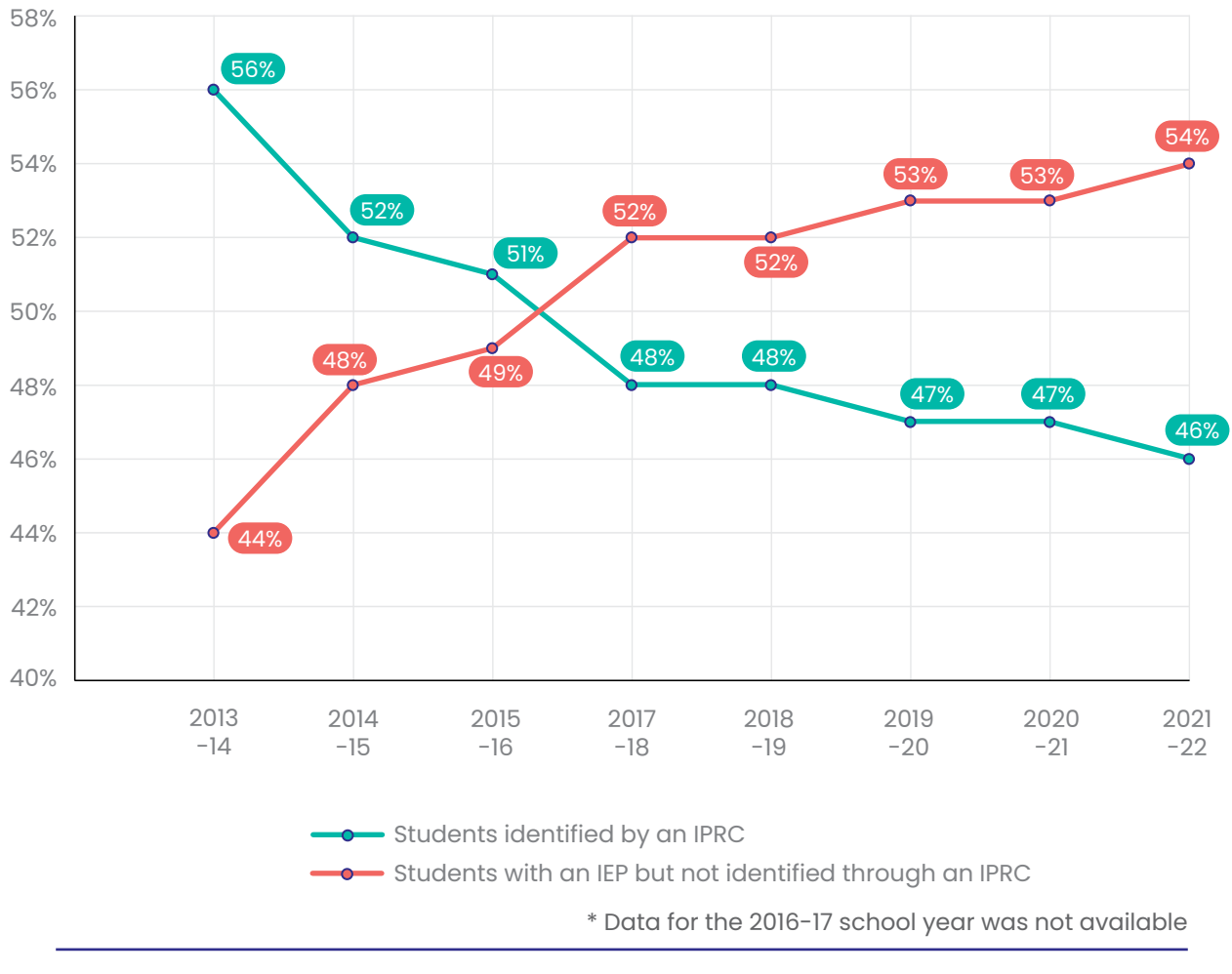
The *Education Act* states that the Minister of Education must "ensure that appropriate special education programs and services are provided for exceptional pupils in accordance with the act and the regulations" and that "it is mandatory for all school boards to provide, or purchase from another board, special education programs and services for their exceptional children."

The identification of students as "exceptional" and the guarantee of supports are only determined through the IPRC process. The reduction of IPRC meetings is therefore a direct decline in guaranteed special education support.

There is significant room for improvement in the IPRC process. In *Reconceptualizing Disability in Education*, Luigi Iannacci, summarizes the literature review and analysis of special education texts written for educators that included information about families who have a child or children with a disability and observed contradictions between the discourse regarding family and school partnerships and the classroom reality of IPRCs:

"The literature analysis ultimately revealed that parents were positioned as objects to be acted upon, deficient in understanding their child themselves and the special education system, in need of being informed by educators about their child's disability, as well as homogeneous in terms of their experiences regarding their child's disability."

Special Education Needs Identification Elementary and Secondary panels 2013-2022



Source: ETFO, compiled from the annual Guides to the Special Education Fund

Different across Ontario

On page 18 of the Renfrew County District School Board Special Education Plan, it states that "The IPRC is not a required component of our service model" and that the purpose of an IPRC is for the placement in a special education class with partial integration, a special education class full-time, or at the request of the parent. Instead, Renfrew County indicates that children with disabilities are supported through personalized IEPs, if required, and a focus on best classroom practices. In other words, they never receive a Ministry of Education-recognized identification or a discussion about what appropriate supports are required in the regular classroom.

Student 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."

A total of 12 exceptionalities are organized under five categories, as outlined by the Ministry of Education:

Behaviour	Communication	Intellectual	Physical	Multiple
Behaviour	Autism Deaf and hard of hearing Language impairment Speech impairment Learning disability	Giftedness* Mild intellectual disability Developmental disability	Physical disability Blind and low vision	Multiple

*Giftedness is included within special education in Ontario. Although giftedness is not a disability, ETFO recognizes that gifted children have intersectional identities that may include a disability. Education in Ontario should continue to fund a variety of gifted programs and placement in those programs should be based on individual student need.

A broad spectrum of needs exists between and within each of the 12 exceptionalities. Even if two children are identified with the same exceptionality, their learning needs must be considered on an individual basis. There is also room for district school boards to individually interpret the Ministry-defined criteria, resulting in variances across the province.

In 2022, the AODA K–12 Education Standards Development Committee released its final report and recommendations to the government on how education can be more accessible to people with disabilities under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (K-12, 2022). It must be noted that the government has not taken any steps toward enacting these recommendations.

Different across Ontario

Let's consider Xander, whose intellectual index and adaptive functioning score was in the 7th percentile. If Xander lives in Guelph, he would meet the Upper Grand District School Board criteria for an exceptionality of a mild intellectual disability (MID) (between 2nd and 8th percentile). However, if Xander lives a 60-minute car ride east in Etobicoke, he would not meet the Toronto District School Board criteria for an MID exceptionality (between 1st and 5th).

The AODA K-12 report highlights that children are only eligible for special education if they fall within one of the 12 Ministry-defined exceptionalities. This has created a major barrier for children with disabilities that are recognized by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the Ontario *Human Rights Code*, such as ADHD or mental health conditions, but are not included in any of the 12 defined exceptionalities.

According to the 2022 Canadian Survey on Disability (Statistics Canada, 2022), of the eight million Canadians aged 15 years and older who reported some type of disability that limited their daily activities, almost 3.1 million (38.6 per cent) of respondents reported a mental health-related disability that impacted their daily lives, and approximately 1.65 million (20.7 per cent) reported a learning disability, the most prevalent being ADHD.

Placement

The IPRC determines the placement of exceptional children. In compliance with the *Education Act (O. Reg. 181/98)* the IPRC must, "before considering the option of placement in a special education class, consider whether placement in a regular class, **with appropriate special education services**, (a) would meet the pupil's needs; and (b) is consistent with parental preferences."

Each board must provide a range of placement options, as defined by the Ministry of Education:

- Regular class with indirect support where the student is placed in a regular class for the entire day, and the teacher receives specialized consultative services
- Regular class with resource assistance where the student is placed in a regular class for most or all of the day and receives specialized instruction, individually or in a small group, within the regular classroom from a qualified special education teacher

- Regular class with withdrawal assistance where the student is placed in a regular class and receives instruction outside the classroom, for less than 50 per cent of the school day, from a qualified special education teacher
- Special education class with partial integration where the student is placed in a special education class for at least 50 per cent of the school day and is integrated with a regular class for at least one instructional period daily
- Full-time special education class for the entire school day

The reality is that district school boards are not always able to offer the full range of placement options. The special education placements or supports that are available are limited and rarely offer the most enabling environments for learning due to the lack of supports. Adding to the complexity, parents and teachers have little control over placement decisions because available funding is often the criterion that dictates placement.

Access to special education programs is also inconsistent across the province, often underscoring and exacerbating existing inequities. Advocacy group People for Education's 2017 annual report on special education in Ontario stated that while 90 per cent of children in the greater Toronto area had access to a full-time special education teacher, that number dropped to 60 per cent in northern Ontario.

"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, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

Different across Ontario

The Keewatin Patricia District School Board Special Education Plan lists five school-based placement options:

- A regular class with indirect support
- A regular class with resource assistance
- A regular class with withdrawal assistance
- A special education class with partial integration
- A special education class full time

However, after listing the placement options, the special education plan notes that the majority of special education children in the board are placed in "a regular class with indirect support."

For their 2023-24 special education survey, the Ontario Autism Coalition asked families what placements were offered to support their children with special education needs. The numbers reflect the greater inclusion of children with special needs in regular classes rather than congregated settings:

30%	Regular classroom
39%	Regular classroom with support
27%	Dedicated autism class, community class, or other special education class
11%	Other
6%	Modified school experience
3%	None of the above

Source: Ontario Autism Coalition, Special Education Survey, 2023-24 School Year

More than a third of the parents in OAC's survey (39 per cent) said they felt their child lacked an appropriate placement. The repercussions of inadequate or inappropriate placements can be severe. In Horizon Education's 2016 report on access to special education in Ontario, 47.1 per cent of the parents surveyed noted that their children suffered often irreparable academic loss due to their inability to access specialized educational services.

Access to appropriate placements has been a debate for almost a century. In his book *A Class By Themselves?*, Jason Ellis describes how, in 1922, the Toronto Board of Education began a program for deaf children that used pure oralism, a method that taught lip-reading and speech, while prohibiting deaf children from signing. Plans for even more oralism in the city's schools were opposed by the Ontario Association of the Deaf (OAD), which argued that the board was attempting to suppress sign language and the unique Deaf culture it nurtured.

During ETFO's 2024 special education focus group discussions, teachers strongly maintained the benefits of self-contained classrooms, in which children made measurable progress in environments where mistakes were made and accepted. Self-contained classrooms, which have much lower maximum class sizes than integrated classes, offer significantly more support and greater access to learning and accessibility services than are currently available in mainstream classroom settings.

Maximum sizes for special education classes for various types of exceptional pupils are outlined in *O. Reg. 298/31* of the *Education Act*:

Type of exceptionality	Maximum class size
Pupils who are emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted (behaviour), have severe learning disabilities, or are below compulsory school age and have impaired hearing (who are deaf and hard of hearing)	8
Pupils who are blind, deaf, have developmental disabilities, or have speech and language disorders	10
Pupils who are hard-of-hearing, have low vision, or have orthopedic or other physical disabilities	12
Pupils in the primary division who are mildly intellectually disabled	12
Pupils in the junior and intermediate divisions who are mildly intellectually disabled	16
Pupils in the elementary division who are gifted	25
Aphasic or autistic pupils, or pupils with multiple disabilities for whom no one disability is dominant	6
Pupils with different exceptionalities in a class for exceptional students	16

"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, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

Teachers expressed during the focus groups that the perceived deficit of special education services and supports includes the loss or impending closure of self-contained special education classrooms and congregated programming. Several participants work in boards that operate under full inclusion models while others are in boards that have eliminated all self-contained special education classes.

"Special education services are totally lacking. Kids are on waitlists for two plus years to get services they absolutely require. The system is so broken."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

General education class sizes are outlined in *O. Reg. 132/12* of the *Education Act*:

Grade	Class size average	Class size limit	Exception
Kindergarten	26	29	Up to 10 per cent of kindergarten classes may exceed the limit, up to 32 students, under the following circumstances: • to reduce the number of Kindergarten/Grade 1 combined grades • if exceeding the limit helps maintain special programs (e.g., FSL)
Grades 1, 2, 3	90 per cent of classes in a district school board should have less than 20	23	
Grades 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	24.5	No limit	

In 2019, the Ontario government announced its plan to increase the funded class size average in grades 4 to 8 from 23.84 children to 24.5 children. This change applied to all district school boards as of September 2019, even if the board had been exempted in the past. The effects of these changes were felt differently from board-to-board and led to the loss of almost 1,000 teaching positions in Ontario's elementary schools.

According to a summary of average class sizes in grades 4 to 8 for the 2018-2019 school year provided in *O. Reg. 132/12* of the *Education Act*, only a quarter (26 per cent) of English public district school boards were achieving the funded class size of 23.84. Forty per cent (9 out of 23) were already reporting average class sizes that exceeded the funded class average of 24.5 starting in September 2019. No further data has been shared since the election of the Doug Ford Conservative government, even though district school boards provide the data to the Ontario Ministry of Education each year. It must be assumed that overall stability of class size averages reported by district school boards must have increased.

	Funded class size of 23.84	Funded class size of 23.84
District School Board	2017-2018 average class size for grades 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8	2018-2019 average class size for grades 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8
Algoma District School Board	24.03	24.03
Avon Maitland District School Board	26.02	25.64
Bluewater District School Board	25.05	24.69
District School Board of Niagara	25.73	25.35
District School Board Ontario North East	21.6	21.6
Grand Erie District School Board	24.15	24.15
Halton District School Board	24.75	24.5
Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board	24.75	24.5
Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board	24.32	24.32
Keewatin-Patricia District School Board	22	22
Lambton Kent District School Board	24.35	24.35
Limestone District School Board	24.4	24.4
Near North District School Board	23.3	23.3
Rainbow District School Board	24.1	24.1
Rainy River District School Board	22.38	22.38
Renfrew County District School Board	24.1	24.1
Superior-Greenstone District School Board	18.5	18.5
Thames Valley District School Board	24.65	24.5
Toronto District School Board	23.24	23.24
Trillium Lakelands District School Board	24.41	24.41
Upper Grand District School Board	24.85	24.5
Waterloo Region District School Board	24.61	24.5
York Region District School Board	24.92	24.57

The funded class size since 2019-2020 has been 24.5 for grades 4 to 8.

The Ministry of Education has not shared district school board average class sizes since the funding change.

The inference is that class size averages have significantly increased.

Red indicates the district school board was already exceeding the new 2019-2020 funded class average of 24.5 students.
Purple indicates the district school board was over the current funded class average of 23.84 but under the new funded class size of 24.5 students.
Green indicates the district school board had class sizes that were under the funded class size of 23.84 students.

Different across Ontario

The 2022-23 Ottawa-Carleton Special Education Plan listed the number of special education classes for each exceptionality:

Exceptionality	Behaviour	Autism	Deaf and Hard of Hearing	Learning Disability	MID	DD
Elementary Classes	12	36	1	14	13	9

In the spring of 2024, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board began reviewing their special education programs. In the 2023-24 special education plan the number of special education classes for each exceptionality was not listed, resulting in a lack of transparency regarding the potential changing availability of self-contained special education classes. In January 2025, the board intends to phase out many special education classrooms, leaving over 400 children without a special education placement.

"Autism classes are full across the board. Not every school has an autism class, but we all have children with autism. The common questions we are getting when thinking about placements going forward are: Are they toileted? Can they feed themselves? Are you evacuating the classroom? If it is no, then they are staying right where they are."

– Special Education Teacher, self-contained classroom, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

Different across Ontario

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board offers an intensive speech and language program for Grade 1 children with profound language delays accompanied, in many cases, by a speech impairment. Children accepted into this program have been assessed with profound expressive language and/or articulation delays with average receptive language skills and/or average cognitive skills. Instruction is based on the Grade 1 curriculum with a speech and language focus.

This program should be maintained, if not expanded. However, it is a locally available program and not subject to *Regulation 298/31* of the *Education Act*. As a result, the district school board does not need to adhere to any specific class sizes.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a working, written plan that moves with the student throughout their education. The IEP must be developed for each student who has been identified as exceptional by an IPRC within 30 school days of the student's placement in a special education program. As a placement typically starts new each September, it follows that IEPs must be developed within 30 school days of the start of the school year.

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 to education. The research and analysis for this report show that not all children receiving special education supports and services are formally identified through the IPRC process. Teachers, paraprofessionals, educational assistants, school administrators, and families use several measures to evaluate a student's challenges and needs when determining whether special education and/or an IEP is right for the student.

The IEP is reviewed and updated at the start of the student's placement each year, and a minimum of once per reporting period. It describes:

- the strengths and needs of an exceptional student or of a student with special needs
- the special education program and services established to meet a student's needs
- how the program and services will be delivered, assessed, and reported on

All IEPs, regardless of their reason for development, must meet the Ministry of Education's IEP standards as outlined in the *Special Education in Ontario, Kindergarten to Grade 12: Policy and Resource Guide* (2017).

An important requirement is that families be consulted in the development of the IEP each year. This parent consultation must be documented, with outcomes of the consultations recorded. Parents are key partners when working with children with special needs. Keeping them informed as the year progresses and engaging them in discussions about their child are important factors in supporting the children. Additionally, the special education teacher serves as a resource to assist classroom teachers as they develop and update children's IEPs, as appropriate.

If an IEP has been created for a student who has not been identified as exceptional through an IPRC but requires special education programs and services, it is expected the IEP will continue with the student as they move through the grades. Should the IEP be deemed no longer necessary, after consultation with the principal, the special education teacher, and the parents, it may be discontinued. The decision to discontinue an IEP should be documented, with the documentation stored in the Ontario Student Record (OSR).

Based on the strengths and needs of a student with special needs, teachers may have to make accommodations or modifications to the student's program, which are reflected in the IEP.

The term accommodation is used to refer to the special teaching and assessment strategies, human supports, and/or individualized equipment required to enable a student to learn and to demonstrate learning. Accommodations do not alter the provincial curriculum expectations for the grade.

Modifications are changes made in the age-appropriate grade level expectations for a subject or course to meet a student's learning needs. These changes may involve developing expectations that reflect knowledge and skills required in the curriculum for a different grade level and/or increasing or decreasing the number and/or complexity of the regular grade level curriculum expectations.

Some children require programing other than that outlined in the provincial curriculum. This is referred to as alternative programming, and it is outlined in the IEP. As there is no provincial alternative curriculum, these programs are developed for the individual child, based on their strengths, needs, and abilities.

Although IEPs are intended to ensure educators have a clear understanding of what children need to be successful in the classroom, they have, in some cases, developed the reputation of being an "add-on" to classroom programming and a source of extra, inequitably distributed work for educators. This has left some members feeling overwhelmed, inadequately supported, and frustrated that their advocacy for children appears to be unheard.

"I have a class with 15 IEPs that all say preferential seating. Our hands are tied. It is impossible to succeed. It is so overwhelming to know that you are letting kids slip through."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

Since 2017, ETFO has tracked which members are writing IEPs, how many IEPs members are writing, and how long it takes to write a single IEP. Over 75 per cent of permanent teachers write an average of seven IEPs per year, each taking about eight hours to complete. That is approximately 60 additional hours of work that teachers complete after school and on weekends.

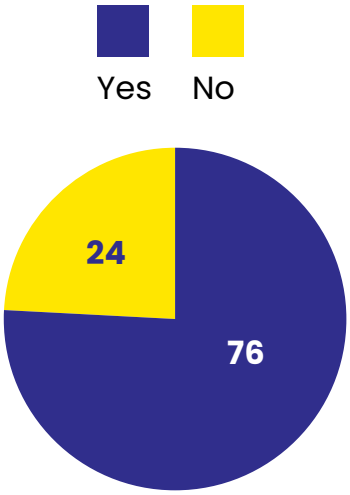
The ETFO special education focus groups conducted in 2024 found that board-provided professional development specific to special education is largely non-existent for mainstream teachers. Some teachers say they are not even trained on how to write IEPs.

"Where is the professional development?" asked one mainstream teacher. "Where is that someone saying, 'Okay this is the student coming into your classroom, here are some supports for you [and the student]. Here's what you can do.' Not a video that I need to find myself. I need someone to say, 'This is how we do it, and we will do it together.'"

The Ontario Autism Coalition's 2023-24 special education survey reported that 89 per cent of families indicated that their special education student had an IEP. However, six per cent did not have an IEP, and five per cent of families were unsure if their child had an IEP. Of the families surveyed, 39 per cent were very dissatisfied with the IEP development process. The OAC argues there may be several reasons for these numbers:

- Families or educators may not fully understand the purpose or process of creating an IEP
- Some schools may be reluctant to initiate the IEP process due to resource limitations, staff shortages, or other systemic barriers
- Families may choose not to pursue an IEP due to concerns about stigma or misunderstanding the potential benefits
- A student's barrier might not require an IEP, even though support is still needed

Majority of members are responsible for writing and maintaining IEPs

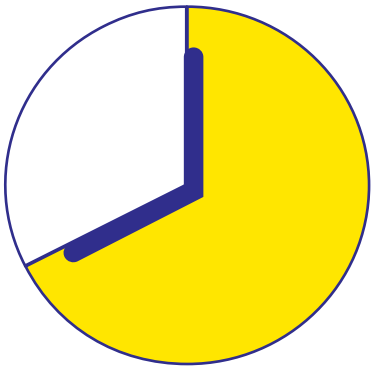


Yes	2024 (%)	2023 (%)	2022 (%)	2021 (%)	2020 (%)	2019 (%)	2018 (%)
Total Sample	63	63	63	63	63	61	64
Permanent teacher	76	78	77	76	75	77	79
Short term OT	7	6	6	7	5	7	6
Long term OT	67	60	64	58	65	56	72
DECE	8	13	8	11	14	12	10
ESP/PSP	10	12	9	12	14	17	37
Primary (K-3)	52	52	52	52	53	50	55
Junior (4-6)	59	59	61	62	59	59	58
Intermediate (7-8)	54	60	59	61	55	52	52

On average, members are responsible for 7.4 IEPs for this school year

Mean	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Total Sample	7.4	7.7	7.8	7.5	7.6	8.2	7.7
Toronto	7.2	7.3	7.5	7.2	7.6	8.3	6.9
Rest of GTA	7.3	7.3	7.0	8.0	6.7	7.4	7.2
Southwestern Ontario	7.5	7.0	7.8	6.9	7.5	7.8	7.7
Eastern/ Ottawa	7.1	8.1	8.5	7.0	7.6	9.5	7.9
Northern Ontario	9.2	9.8	10.4	7.9	9.8	9.6	9.3
Rest of Ontario	7.8	9.2	7.8	8.7	9.4	8.0	8.2
Spec ed resource teacher	21.6	20.6	22.2	20.7	20.8	21.2	20.8
Spec ed classroom teacher	10.0	10.4	9.9	11.2	11.6	11.7	10.3
Workload caused negative impact	7.3	7.8	7.7	7.4	7.4	8.1	7.8
Primary (K-3)	5.5	5.5	6.2	6.0	6.0	6.4	6.1
Junior (4-6)	8.2	8.3	8.9	9.1	9.1	9.6	8.6
Intermediate (7-8)	10.1	9.9	10.7	10.9	10.9	10.8	10.2

On average, members spend 8.1 hours on a single IEP during the school year



8.1 Hours

Mean	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Total Sample	8.1	7.5	7.8	8.2	8.1	8.0	7.6
Toronto	8.9	8.0	8.0	8.8	9.0	8.7	8.5
Rest of GTA	8.8	7.9	8.3	9.3	8.7	8.5	8.6
Southwestern Ontario	7.7	6.7	7.4	7.3	7.8	7.5	6.7
Eastern/ Ottawa	7.7	7.5	8.0	7.9	7.8	7.8	7.0
Northern Ontario	7.1	8.3	6.4	6.2	7.9	7.4	5.7
Rest of Ontario	7.9	7.3	7.7	7.3	6.7	7.2	7.6
Spec ed resource teacher	10.7	9.6	9.8	10.3	10.6	10.6	9.7
Spec ed classroom teacher	12.3	11.8	11.4	11.6	13.3	13.3	13.6
Workload caused negative impact	8.4	7.8	8.1	8.3	8.3	8.3	8.0

Ontario special education policies have been informed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the Ontario *Human Rights Code* and are communicated through district school board special education plans. However, 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. This has resulted in significant inconsistencies regarding special education availability across the province that is incredibly challenging for families with children with disabilities to navigate.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education convene a special education committee that includes education stakeholders (including the affiliates) that meets three times during the school year to review and advise on special education policy.
- That the Ministry of Education engage education unions as full partners in the discussion and implementation of special education at local and provincial levels.
- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased, ongoing, and sustainable funding for high-quality professional learning for educators in special education and student mental health, to take place within the instructional day.
- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding for the creation and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP) including professional development and the development of curriculum-related resources.

From Student to Teacher – ETFO Members with Disabilities

ETFO members with disabilities share their childhood educational experiences and their thoughts on special education in Ontario today.

Lydia has a learning disability and entered a general education kindergarten class in 1980.

Lydia acknowledges that her success is the result of the expertise and professionalism of her public school teachers. When Lydia thinks back to Grade 1, she has vivid memories of her classroom windows, the changing sky, and daydreaming. She remembers how by Grade 2, the classroom educational assistant and teacher-librarian always seemed to be there for her. By Grade 4 she was regularly receiving resource support. Lydia now understands that this attention was to support her learning, but at the time she did not feel any different than any of her other classmates.

Lydia began reading in Grade 6 and continued successfully through school with the support of her elementary and secondary teachers. Once in university, with its emphasis on lectures and independent reading, Lydia began to struggle. She sought help from an available counselling service for support with study strategies. This eventually led to Lydia receiving a psycho-educational assessment and a diagnosis of a learning disability. Lydia became a teacher in 2000 and is qualified to teach special education.

When Lydia's daughter was diagnosed with a learning disability years later, she also had excellent teachers. But unlike Lydia, her daughter did not have access to educational assistants or resource support. It was Lydia who tutored her every day after school. Lydia now feels the chronic underfunding of the education system both professionally and personally.

CHAPTER 3: SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING

by Ricardo Tranjan and Carolina Aragão

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. The increase in class sizes and the introduction of mandatory online courses have resulted in the province having 5,000 fewer teachers than it would otherwise. School buildings are not keeping up either. The latest estimate puts the school repair backlog at $16.8 billion[2]. This amount doesn't include many things, like maintaining portable classrooms that were meant to be temporary but have been used for so long that they need fixing. It also doesn't include monitoring air quality or replacing lead pipes.

To see how much the Ford government has cut funding to your neighbourhood public school please visit buildingbetterschools.ca.

[2] Legislative Assembly of Ontario, Committee Transcripts, June 8, 2021.

In addition to funding cuts and growing repair backlogs, Ontario's school boards struggle with funding formulas that inadequately estimate need and ineptly allocate resources, leading to the structural underfunding of several school programs. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) has carefully documented funding formula flaws and proposed solutions to address them. Yet the funding problems persist, negatively affecting different population groups and program areas. For example, the poorly designed and recently gutted Learning Opportunities Grant has negatively impacted schools with a high concentration of children from low-income households. This chapter focuses on another critical area: special education.

While increasing funding would positively impact children with special education needs, a long-term solution requires changing the funding model. 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. The reality of this funding model is the structural underfunding of special education and a devasting lack of knowledge about the student population.

This chapter discusses how the special education funding model came about, how it works, its flaws, and how to fix it.

Educational reforms in Ontario

The Ontario public education system underwent significant changes following the rise to power of Mike Harris' Progressive Conservative Party in 1995. Influenced by a neoliberal agenda focused on rolling back the state through tax reductions and budget cuts, educational reforms were part of an overhaul of provincial finances that drastically altered public services in Ontario.

Centralization was a main pillar of these reforms. New processes and agencies sought to standardize and closely monitor schools, implementing an "audit culture." For funding, centralization translated to a funding formula that allocates resources to schools based primarily on enrolment. Funding for teachers, learning materials, and professional support is allocated using a per-pupil measure, while facilities and operations such as heating, lighting, and maintenance receive funding based on a square-foot-per-student calculation.

Leading economist, Hugh Mackenzie has argued that although the new funding formula promised equality among schools across the province, its "one-size-fits-all" logic has, in practice, led to significant financial challenges for many schools (Mackenzie, 2009). In Mackenzie's view, the funding formula design does not recognize that critical school costs are fixed and do not vary with enrolment, thereby failing to guarantee sufficient funding for basic school expenses. Because items such as teacher salaries,

building maintenance, and library resources are fixed at the school level, per-student metrics do not guarantee that schools will receive the funding they need. This system leaves schools critically underfunded, often compelling communities and school boards to fundraise to bridge funding gaps, further exacerbating systemic inequalities between schools based on the economic resources of their local communities.

This context of financial scarcity insidiously fosters the privatization process. Instead of working toward a quality public education system for all, boards and schools are forced to focus primarily on their own financial survival.

As the formula's shortcomings in meeting specific school needs became apparent, the Ministry of Education introduced targeted grants for specific areas like library services, language support, and transportation. Although these grants provided some relief to schools, this patchwork approach did not address the core issues of resource allocation, leaving the fundamental flaws of the funding formula unresolved.

Special education funding reforms in the 1990s and 2000s

Until the early 2000s, including through the Harris Conservative government years, special education funding was aligned with the needs of children at each school board. Funding was split into two core grants: The Special Education Per-Pupil Amount (SEPPA) and the Intensive Support Amount (ISA).

The SEPPA was directly tied to the number of children with special education needs. Funding was exclusively used to support special education services, such as hiring specialized teachers, educational assistants, speech-language therapists, and psychologists. In turn, the ISA provided resources for children with high support needs based on demands outlined in Individual Education Plans (IEPs), such as one-on-one assistance and specialized equipment. The ISA also provided flexibility for school boards, enabling them to combine it with other grants to design effective programs.

In 2010, a significant shift occurred in special education funding – and not for the better. The Liberal provincial government under Dalton McGuinty replaced funding linked directly to identified student needs with allocations based on general student enrolment (called per-pupil funding) and the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model, which estimates the likelihood of children requiring special education programs or services at each school board. The statistical model represented a fundamental change in special education funding from *known needs to estimated needs*. This change limited the availability of support across the system, forcing school boards to focus on rationing resources rather than meeting needs.

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.

A detailed list of special education grants and allocation rules is included in Appendix 1. For the remainder of this chapter, the focus will summarize what the major funding envelopes, complicated calculations, and lengthy allocation rules mean for children and educators in the classroom.

For the 2024-25 school year, special education grants are distributed across four allocations:

- **Per-Pupil Allocation:** Provides funding to all school boards to support additional costs for children with special needs, based on total student enrolment rather than the enrolment of children with special education needs. Funding is mainly for staffing costs, professional development, and learning materials.
- **Differentiated Needs Allocation:** Aims to address variation in special education needs across schools and boards. Amounts fluctuate annually based on an estimation formula and a statistical prediction model. Subcomponents fund local school board priorities, multi-disciplinary education teams, collaborative initiatives, and special needs assessments (see appendix 1 for details).
- **Complex Supports Allocation:** Provides funding for children with high needs, including those requiring support from more than two full-time, board-paid staff at a time, due to health and safety needs; children and youth who cannot attend regular school due to their primary need for care, treatment, or because of a court order to serve a custody or detention sentence; and children with autism and other special education needs.
- **Specialized Equipment Allocation:** Assists school boards with the costs of specialized equipment to support children with special education needs that are essential for them to attend school, access curriculum, or participate in board programs and courses.

As Table 1 shows, 87 per cent of all special education funding is based either on general enrolment or an estimation of the number of children with special education needs, with the statistical model shaping 37 per cent of the total allocation. Only 13 per cent of the funding is based on the known needs of children receiving support.

Table 1. Special education funding, amount per allocation, allocation criteria, and allocation as a share of total special education funding, 2024-25

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

Major limitations

The **Per-Pupil Allocation** is a blunt instrument that disregards real needs. Instead of the Ministry of Education assuming responsibility for providing the resources current children need, boards and schools must make do with the amount they receive. This is rationing, not funding.

The **Differentiated Needs Allocation** is supposed to address the variations in need across schools, but it doesn't do that well. Much of this allocation is determined using the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model (SESPM), which estimates the proportion of children that likely need special education programs and services.

Statistical models simulate the real world instead of measuring it. Their main advantage is reducing the cost and time required for assessing needs. Their main disadvantage is the loss of precision. Put simply, it's easier to model than to measure, but measuring is more precise.

More specific limitations of the statistical model pertain to how it is built and run. A key issue with the prediction structure of the existing model is its inability to incorporate and respond to shocks. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted child and youth mental health due to prolonged school closures, social isolation, and disruptions to daily routines, leading to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Similarly, climate emergencies are linked to mental health problems among children and youth and are likely to become more common because of the climate crisis. The current statistical model takes years to respond to these emerging needs.

The quality of inputs also matters. While the statistical model attempts to approximate real-world conditions, using neighbourhood-level socioeconomic characteristics, calculations are based on outdated data. Currently, the model combines information from the 2006 and 2021 censuses, with 80 per cent of the formula based on data from 2006 and only 20 per cent using data from 2021, which is already stale.

Ontario's social and economic landscape has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Population growth was accompanied by a substantial rise in the racialized and foreign-born populations in the province, altering neighbourhood composition in varied ways. At the same time, poverty and income inequality have increased, a fact not reflected in the current model.

Differentiated Needs Allocation — the math doesn't math

The statistical model approach combines neighbourhood-level data from the 2006 and 2021 census with children's demographic characteristics in the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS). First, the Ministry uses 14 logistic regression models to assess the likelihood of each student requiring special education services. These models combine information from individual student characteristics and neighbourhood-level data to predict specific needs. For each student, the Ministry runs one regression for each of the 12 categories of exceptionalities defined by the Ministry, as well as two additional regressions to account for other, less clearly identified needs. These models then generate predicted probabilities for all children, which estimate how likely it is that a student will require special education services for each type of exceptionality in each school board.

Next, the Ministry calculates the likelihood of children needing special

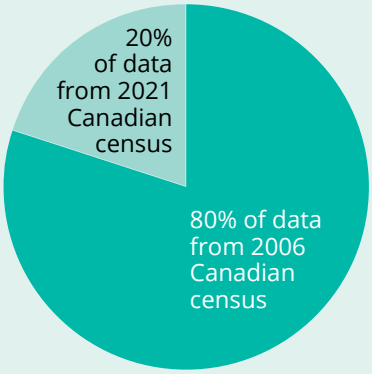
education services by summing the predicted probabilities for all children within a school board. This total probability is then multiplied by the board's Average Daily Enrolment (ADE) to estimate the overall number of children requiring special education services in every school board. The differentiated needs amount is then calculated based on the share of the total predicted number of children needing services across the province.

The statistical model is grounded in research on the social determinants of health, which highlight how various factors – including personal experiences, living environments, and broader social and economic conditions – influence health outcomes. Together, these non-medical factors help to shape children's and teenagers' mental and physical development and well-being.

For example, the socioeconomic conditions of families play a critical role in children's health. Systemic inequities, such as racism and xenophobia, also influence health by further exacerbating disparities among children. Racialized and immigrant families often reside in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with greater exposure to pollution, unstable housing, and limited access to services and recreational spaces. These conditions contribute to higher rates of anxiety and chronic illnesses in children. Additionally, chronic stress stemming from poverty and financial instability disrupts biological systems, increasing the risk of developmental and health challenges over time. These interconnected conditions are critical in shaping the demand for special education services.

A logistic regression model is used in statistics to predict the probability of an event happening.

Neighbourhood level data



Student demographic characteristics from OnSIS

A total of 14 regression models to assess the likelihood of each student requiring special education support.

One logistic regression model for each exceptionality recognized by the Ontario Ministry of Education and

Two regression models to represent less clearly identified needs

Models generate predicted probabilities for all students, estimating how likely it is that a student requires special education services for each type of exceptionality.

The sum of the probabilities are multiplied by Average Daily Enrolment.

This multiplication estimates the total number of students requiring special education support.

The differentiated needs amount is then divided among the district school boards based on their share of estimated students requiring special education support compared to the provincial total.

In turn, the key limitation of **Complex Support Allocation** is its limited funding. The original rationale behind this envelope was good: children with very high needs require a separate funding stream. The stricter eligibility rules and lengthy applications could have been justifiable if the amounts disbursed were substantial, but they were not.

Take, for example, the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), the largest component within this envelope. Until the 2022-23 school year, district school boards had to demonstrate that a student required more than two full-time staff to support their needs to receive a maximum allowance of $28,803 per year, or roughly half of the salary of an educational assistant. In other words, the Ministry would pitch in a little bit but left it to district school boards and schools to figure out how to pay for most of the support children need.

In practice, this means that special education classes are mainly funded through the general pool of special education resources. It is a common misconception that creating such classes generates additional resources from the Ministry of Education. That is not accurate. Most funding for these classes comes from the Per-pupil and Differentiated Needs allocations. To support children with very high needs, principals must reallocate resources to special education classes from regular classes with children who have special education needs, and boards must reallocate resources from one school to another. In Ontario's education system, we take from one child to give to another, all the time.

In 2024, the Ministry of Education announced that the SIP allocation would be capped at a fixed amount. In other words, the largest needs-based envelope – created to address gaps in a funding model that does not rely on assessments – will also disregard needs. The Ontario government is, once again, requiring boards and schools to ration fixed amounts instead of providing the resources needed.

Finally, the limitation of **Specialized Equipment Allocation** mirrors that of Complex Support Allocation. The Ministry requires boards to demonstrate a need in order to assist with costs, up to a certain amount; boards and schools must figure out where the rest of the money comes from. If the needs are high, this will require taking from one student to give to another.

What underfunding looks like in practice

Numbers can never capture the classroom experiences of children and educators that will be described in chapter 4, but they help contextualize them. Using microdata from the Educational Finance Information System (EFIS) and Ministry of Education data on the number of children enrolled in special education programs and services, we could estimate what the various funding envelopes translate to in practice. We focused on the Differentiated Special Needs Allocation (DSENA), the second-largest funding envelope, meant to cover all children with special education needs.

In 2022-23, the year for which this data is available, school boards received an estimated $4,200 in DSENA funding for each student with special education needs, on average. Assuming each student had that share of funding applied exclusively to them (which is not the case), this is what schools would be able to provide them with[3]:

- Special education 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 funded class average of 24.5 students for grades 4 to 8, including the three children with special education needs. This very limited number of support hours highlights the enormous gap between allocated resources and needs.

[3] For these estimates, we use DSENA allocations (minus the SIP) reported in the Educational Finance Information System 2022-2023 Revised Estimated and referenced salaries outlined in the Ministry of Education 2022-2023 Technical Papers. Rates for classroom teachers include preparation time. Rates for professionals/paraprofessionals include estimated travel and administrative activities, which is why the authors chose to provide a range.

Another way to illustrate the inadequacy of Ontario's special education funding model is to look at the overall number of dedicated special education staff per student with special education needs, as shown in Table 2.

The first column captures special education teachers assigned to special education classrooms or classes; teachers in regular classrooms with children with special education needs are not included in these counts. The second column captures educational assistants assigned to regular classrooms and special education classrooms. The third column captures all other dedicated staff, including social workers, child and youth workers, speech therapists, psychologists, and classroom consultants. These professionals usually serve several schools, spending a limited number of hours in each and an even smaller number of hours in any classroom. For example, most speech therapists provide support to educators working with children with language development difficulties a few hours a month instead of directly providing support to children, though some speech therapists work directly with children who require substantial support. The third column uses the full-time equivalent of the various services.

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.

These numbers do not tell the whole story. Given that funding for children with very high needs is so inadequate, those children absorb a significant share of the available resources, making the average number of staff supporting children with more moderate needs even smaller than Table 2 shows. Whereas educators often assume the diagnosis of a specific condition in a student who requires substantial support will generate additional resources, diagnoses mainly increase the pressure on boards to spread resources thinner across schools and classrooms. The current funding model forces boards to ration resources, not to meet needs.

Table 2. Dedicated special education staff per student with special education needs, elementary schools in public English boards, 2022-23 school year, Ontario

School board	Elementary special education enrolment	Children with special education needs per special education classroom teaching staff	Children with special education needs per special education educational assistant	Children with special education needs per other special education staff, including specialists
Algoma DSB	1,438	25	9	110
Avon Maitland DSB	1,168	24	6	85
Bluewater DSB	2,462	28	11	73
DSB of Niagara	4,091	24	11	46
DSB Ontario North East	1,049	17	10	69
Durham DSB	6,469	18	11	105
Grand Erie DSB	2,313	25	10	89
Greater Essex County DSB	2,938	15	10	16
Halton DSB	6,196	17	9	44
Hamilton-Wentworth DSB	4,257	-	8	84
Hastings & Prince Edward DSB	1,939	31	11	90
Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB	4,266	33	9	80
Keewatin-Patricia DSB	398	13	4	37
Lakehead DSB	759	23	5	271
Lambton Kent DSB	2,137	26	10	82
Limestone DSB	2,781	37	15	55
Near North DSB	1,302	25	10	80
Ottawa-Carleton DSB	7,713	17	13	105
Peel DSB	13,707	17	8	85
Rainbow DSB	1,579	10	10	54
Rainy River DSB	341	34	4	34
Renfrew County DSB	1,033	26	7	31
Simcoe County DSB	6,800	24	11	93
Superior-Greenstone DSB	152	17	4	35
Thames Valley DSB	4,881	14	6	57
Toronto DSB	23,126	109	17	55
Trillium Lakelands DSB	2,506	31	12	161
Upper Canada DSB	3,841	31	12	122
Upper Grand DSB	3,861	29	11	53
Waterloo Region DSB	6,814	21	15	28
York Region DSB	9,817	13	9	80
English public school boards	132,134	23	10	60

Source: Ontario Ministry of Education, Educational Finance Information System, 2022-2023; Ontario Ministry of Education, Special education enrolment by the school board, 2022-23 (obtained by direct request); calculations by the authors.

> **"School boards have their envelopes and they only have so much money. They feel that special education is that area that they can withdraw [from] and just put children back in regular classrooms, put that burden on teachers. We do what we do and we do it well. But year after year after year we have to do more with less. And those are our most vulnerable children. As a teacher, after all these years, I still do not have the qualifications to meet those children where they are."**
>
> *– Special Education Teacher, self-contained classroom, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups*

Fixing the special education funding formula

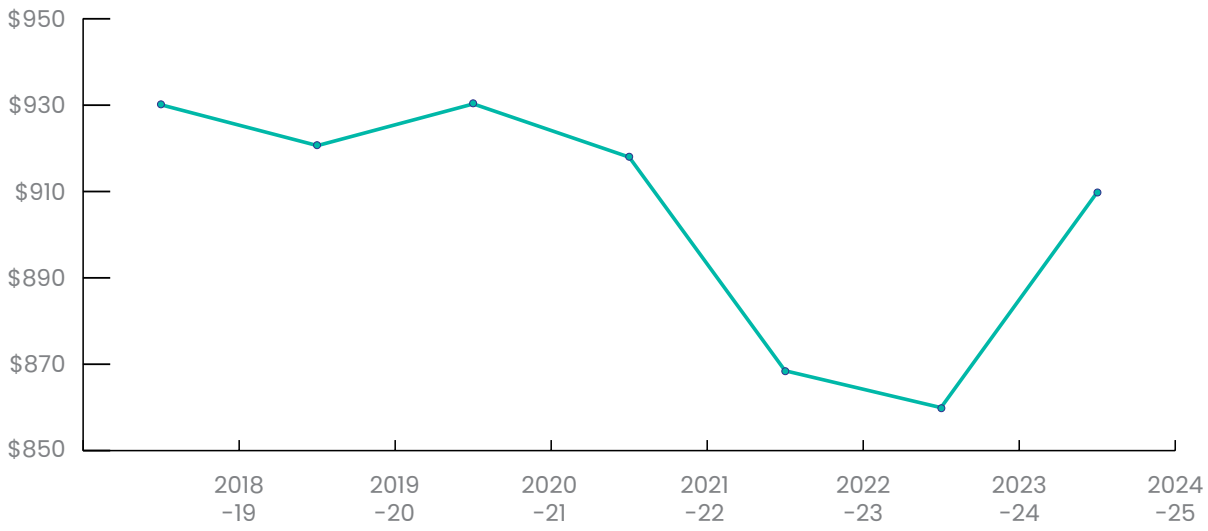
There are three immediate ways to improve the funding formula used in Ontario to help close the gap between the existing programs and the needed supports. These quick fixes will not address the fundamental problems with the funding formula, however. An adequate funding model would be based on assessed needs rather than estimations. That is the actual fix. In this section, we look at both quick fixes and the actual fix.

Quick Fix #1: Index special education funding to inflation

Since the onset of the pandemic, special education funding in Ontario has struggled to keep pace with inflation, raising concerns about its ability to meet growing demand.

Looking at the per-student allocation of the Special Education Per-Pupil Amount (SEPPA), we see that while values reported by the Ministry of Education show nominal increases between the fiscal years of 2018-19 and 2024-25, inflation-adjusted figures reveal a more concerning trend. **Real funding declined** between 2020-21 and 2022-23, and although a modest rebound has occurred since then, the current inflation-adjusted funding remains below pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, enrolment trends suggest that the number of children requiring special education support is rising, particularly in secondary schools.

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.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the child and youth mental health crisis, with growing rates of anxiety, stress, and other challenges contributing to the need for enhanced educational and mental health support in schools. To address these issues, it is essential for the Ontario government to, at the very least, ensure that special education funding keeps pace with inflation. Maintaining inflation-adjusted funding levels is a basic, first step in providing schools with the resources needed to meet children's growing demands.

2 Quick Fix #2: Address the assessment backlog

As highlighted in chapter 2, ETFO's data collection reveals that 59 per cent (elementary data only) of children receiving special education support had not been assessed by an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process, indicating the lack of school board resources to meet demands related to special education. IPRCs are critical in supporting children with special needs by determining their areas of exceptionality and recommending appropriate educational placement and support. This process is an essential part of ensuring children receive the tailored special education programs they need. Without it, children's success in regular or special education classes can be profoundly compromised. As observed in chapter 1 and 2, the IPRC process and special education policy must be reviewed to ensure families are heard, children's best interests are considered, and the rights of both are respected.

3 Quick Fix #3: Enhancing the statistical model

The statistical model could be changed to yield more accurate predictions. The current design uses insufficient student information in its estimates. Currently, the model uses information on children's grade and gender, but more student-level information can be incorporated into the model. The Ontario School Information System (OnSIS) already collects extensive information about children, including country of origin; time in Canada; First Nation, Métis, and Inuit identification; and whether a student is under the care of a Children's Aid Society. Incorporating this data into the prediction models could enhance their accuracy, enabling the Ontario government to better capture the social determinants of health that influence the need for special education services and more effectively support the evolving needs of school boards.

Incorporating information about assessment backlogs would also improve the statistical model by acting as a proxy for the number of children with unmet needs. For instance, records from the Toronto District School Board show that there are almost 1,400 children either waiting for or receiving assessment for special education, accounting for about 12 per cent of the board's total special education enrolment (Toronto, 2024).

The Real Fix: Replace the general-enrolment-based funding and the statistical model

By funding special education based on general enrolment and statistical estimates, the Ministry of Education avoids getting into fine-grained financial matters of the actual cost of providing support. Instead, the Ministry delegates the responsibility to boards and schools, which are tasked with rationing insufficient funding across schools.

A funding formula based on assessed needs and individual support plans would provide a clearer picture of funding gaps. Knowing is better than estimating. That is the reform the education system needs.

About Ricardo Tranjan & Carolina Aragão Authors of Chapter 3

Ricardo Tranjan, PhD, is a senior researcher on housing and social policy at the Ontario office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. He has authored several analyses of public education funding, income support programs, and the political economy of housing, including the best-selling book, *The Tenant Class*.

Carolina Aragão, PhD, is a researcher at the Ontario office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Before arriving in Canada, she worked as a researcher at the Pew Research Centre in Washington, D.C., and as a project officer for the Brazilian bureau of the International Labour Organization. She has authored peer-reviewed academic articles and several reports on children, families, education, and work.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education immediately index special education funding to inflation, address the assessment backlog, and enhance the statistical model.
- That the Ministry of Education resume the practice of including the breakdown of funding allocations under the education category in the provincial budget.
- That the Ministry of Education establish an independent, external review of Ontario's education funding formula to ensure it reflects actual student needs and close any funding gaps that may exist by increasing base special education grants.
- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased enveloped special education funding that is more accessible and allows for more flexibility to meet the wide range of needs of all children throughout the school year.

From Student to Teacher – ETFO Members with Disabilities

ETFO members with disabilities share their childhood educational experiences and their thoughts on special education in Ontario today.

Abigale is hard of hearing and entered a general education kindergarten class in 1973.

Because Abigale was non-speaking, her parents were originally told that she had a developmental disability. This diagnosis did not align with what her parents, a nurse and a teacher, were observing at home. Through ongoing advocacy, it was eventually discovered that she was completely deaf. At four years old, tubes were inserted in her ears. Although Abigale remained completely deaf in her left ear, she gained some hearing in her right ear.

Abigale began speaking at five years old. She credits her clear articulation as an adult to weekly speech and language therapy she was able to access in childhood and her parents' daily implementation of the assigned homework from the sessions. When Abigale changed schools in Grade 2, the special education teacher provided speech and language support until Grade 4. She fondly remembers the scrap book of speech sounds.

After Abigale became a teacher, she finally decided to try hearing aids and at 31 she heard a bird sing for the first time in her life. Abigale admits it can be exhausting to listen and that there are still some sounds at the start and end of words that she cannot process.

Though awareness of deafness has increased over the years, there is still a lack of acceptance. Abigale is concerned about the declining access to the already limited availability of speech and language therapists for deaf and hard of hearing children.

CHAPTER 4: CHALLENGES IN THE CLASSROOM

"This morning, at nine o'clock, something truly amazing happened in Ontario; 2 million kids turned up in publicly funded buildings, and sat down at desks in publicly funded classrooms, and continued the process of becoming adults with the help of publicly funded teachers.

Cast in this light, the system is something of a marvel. The fact that Ontario has among the highest participation rates of publicly funded education in the world is a sign that, for all its flaws, it's doing something right. It is, in other words, a system worth protecting. That's why I think people like me get so upset when the funding starts to undermine our ability to deliver that."

– Hugh Mackenzie, "Cuts to Toronto Schools Are Carving into Bone," The Walrus (2024)

ETFO's *Fulfilling the Promise* (2002) detailed a series of issues created by changes to education by the Mike Harris Conservative government. In listening to ETFO members during the 2024 special education focus groups, we found that these challenges are still, more than 20 years later, present in Ontario classrooms.

What follows is an updated examination of these issues, and ETFO's recommendations to resolve them.

A lack of early interventions

Starting Kindergarten is an important event in a child's life, but even more so for families whose children have disabilities.

Kindergarten educators play an integral role for families of children with special education needs. By establishing connections and building relationships with parents, teachers, and designated early childhood educators (DECEs) develop a partnership that serves the children in the program. Knowing their children as well as they do, parents provide essential information that helps educators meet the children's individual learning needs more effectively.

"We need more PEOPLE (staff with training) to support children. Although other supports are helpful – professional development, resource books, apps to support student learning – it's the people that we need to help support children."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

Within any kindergarten classroom, children demonstrate a wide range of strengths and needs. Kindergarten educators plan programs accordingly that honour the unique gifts that all children bring and reflect the belief that all children are capable and competent learners who are full of potential.

ETFO affirms the long-standing position that all kindergarten classes should be staffed accordingly with a teacher and a DECE, which is in the best interest of early learners. It should be noted that this staffing model is not in place in all kindergarten classrooms across the province, despite ETFO's position that the educator partnership in the kindergarten classroom is foundational for children's learning.

"Educator team members have complementary skills that enable them to create a nurturing and stimulating learning environment that supports the unique needs of each child. While an educator team will reflect the uniqueness of its members, the hallmark of all successful partnerships is an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and open communication" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 112).

The benefits of early childhood education and interventions are well established. High-quality early childhood education is generally thought to accelerate cognitive and language development in the short term, and research has found its effects can be detected even in late secondary school.

The Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society (2020) report cites an analysis of 22 experimental studies that found early childhood education reduces special education placement by 8.1 per cent, lessens grade repetition by 8.3 per cent, and increases high school graduation by 11.4 per cent (McCoy, 2017).

"We have been told that JK–Gr. 1 children don't really need IEPs. I think that denies the real needs of some of our most vulnerable learners."

– Regular Classroom Teacher with a special education background, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

Table 3. Average rates of special education placement, grade retention, and high school graduation for early childhood education participants versus non-participants

	Special Education	Grade Retention	High School Graduation
No early childhood education	28.3%	30.6%	62.6%
With early childhood education	20.3%	22.7%	74.0%

Source: *McCoy et al, Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium- and Long-Term Educational Outcomes*

Memorial University professor David Philpott and a team of researchers from across Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. examined more than 50 years of international data and also concluded that participation in quality early childhood education decreased special education needs and insulated children against requiring supports later in their school experience.

The findings included that high school success rates increased by more than 15 per cent and that behavioural and mental health challenges were significantly reduced for children who had received early childhood interventions. (Philpott, 2019)

Writing about the research in The Conversation, Philpott highlighted the long-term benefits of Early Years education: "In Ontario, the success of Junior and Senior Kindergarten has produced startling results: academic and developmental gains the children are enjoying are not fading as they get older, and the impact is greatest for those most at risk for special education placements."

The economic benefits of early childhood education and interventions are also well established. Philpott believes while overall investments in the early years more than "pay for themselves," the return is even greater in terms of the impact on special education resources and funding.

However, the transition from preschool to public school can be complicated, as there is often less support available for children with special education needs. This is illustrated in changing staffing ratios. As per *Ontario's Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*, preschool children experience a staffing ratio of 8 to 1 in daycare settings, and 12 to 1 in kindergarten.

When children enter Kindergarten in Ontario, classes with more than 16 students are staffed with a kindergarten educator team consisting of a teacher and a DECE. While these ratios might at first appear comparable to those of daycare settings, per *O. Reg. 132/12* of the *Education Act*, the average kindergarten class size is 26, with

"We've been told kindergarten children don't get placements. But we have our kindergarten classrooms evacuating, we have Grade 3 classes evacuating regularly because it's taking so long to identify, get parents on board, work through the system . . ."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

a maximum of 29. The staffing levels, however, do not increase to match the greater number of students.

Children with disabilities often require additional support to adjust to the school environment. This is particularly true for those who experience a combination of needs rather than one single exceptionality, which requires individualized and multi-faceted support from service providers.

To add to the complexity of this transition, services to help children with special education needs often shift from government agencies to school boards once children enter Kindergarten, and early interventions and resources already in place at child-care centres or preschools often do not accompany the children into their kindergarten classrooms.

Experts in the field of special education continually advocate for children with disabilities to be given opportunities for early intervention in an inclusive school environment so they can prosper as adults. Reid Lyon observes that, "the longer children with disability in basic reading skills, at any level of severity, go without identification and intervention, the more difficult the task of remediation and the lower the rate of success" (Lyon, 1996).

"We haven't really had much in the way of special education classes in my area for quite some time. [There is a huge push] to an inclusion model, but without available supports. I spend most of my time working with kindergarten children. We have almost a makeshift withdrawal kindergarten program that ends up happening for half the day, because we have huge numbers of children diagnosed and on waiting lists to be diagnosed who need services because they're not functioning safely in classrooms."

– Special Education Resource Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus group

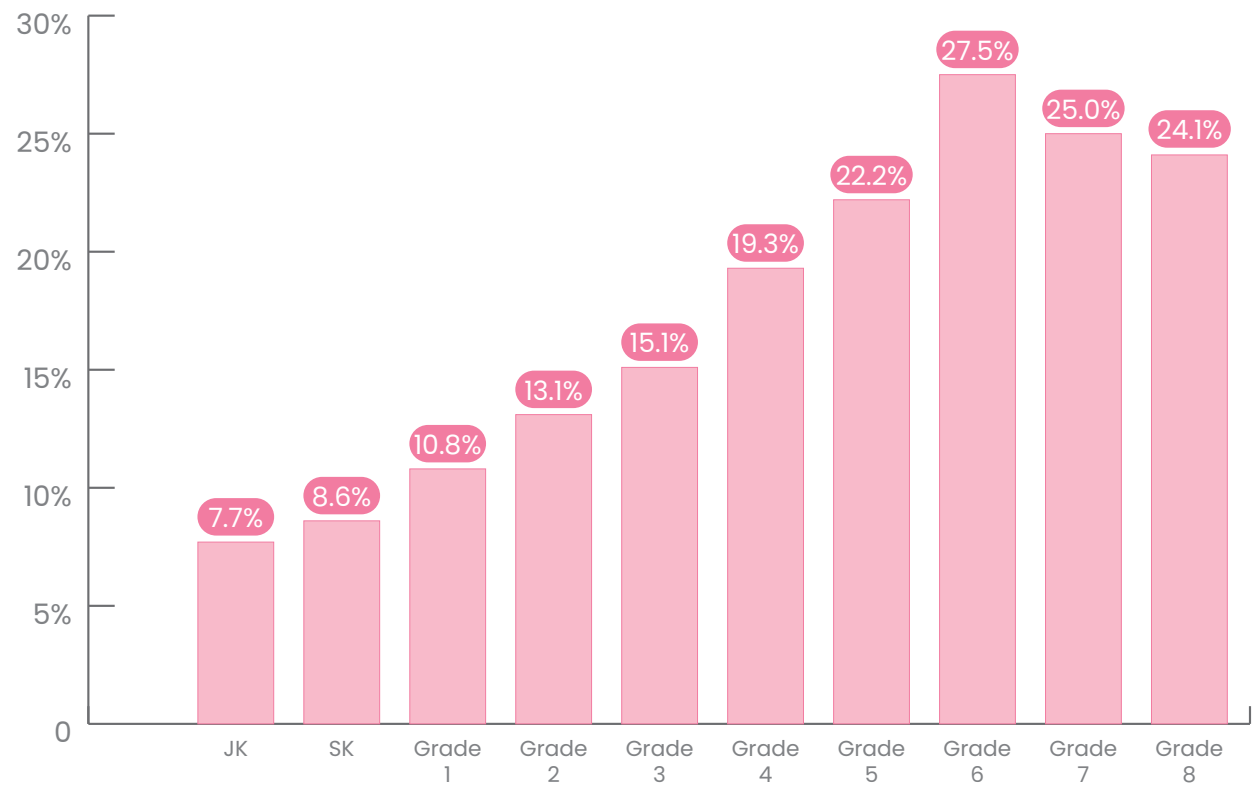
The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC)'s Right to Read inquiry, which focused on early reading skills, found that Ontario's public education system doesn't meet the needs of children with reading disabilities. The inquiry's final report noted a lack of access to early learning interventions:

"There are a few exceptions where boards do have good programs for the youngest children, but once again, demand outstrips supply. The lack of consistency between boards and schools is concerning. Good early intervention programs should be available to all children, regardless of where in Ontario they go to school or which school they attend in a board."

The lack of special education support for the early years was also observed through ETFO's 2023 all-member survey on violence in schools. Special education teachers were asked which grades they worked with. Their responses show that most special education support is concentrated in grades 4 to 8, with a much smaller percentage serving Kindergarten. ETFO's position is that **all** grades require an increase in special education support, but this is especially true for the early years.

During the 2022-26 round of central collective bargaining, ETFO was concerned that the Ontario Ministry of Education was creating a false sense of accountability by arbitrarily selecting recommendations from the Right to Read report that required the least amount of investment. In response, ETFO bargained for an additional 401 early reading specialist teachers to support both the implementation of early reading screeners and early intervention for children who may be experiencing or at risk of experiencing difficulty with reading. (Refer to the 2022-2026 central collective agreement for the memorandum of understanding for early reading screeners.)

Grades primarily worked with by special education teachers



Source: Stratcom, The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario 2023 Workplace Violence Survey

In other words, it was ETFO's bargaining that secured the implementation of recommendation 69 of the Right to Read report, not government-led initiatives. However, it must be noted that these allowances are only in place until the end of this collective agreement, which expires on August 31, 2026. The question then becomes how the early reading intervention support teachers will be funded after the collective agreement expires, and if there is a possibility of expanding this support.

We must continue to advocate for funding for early interventions and supports. As the research proves, properly funded, high-quality education in the early years benefits children with disabilities for the rest of their lives.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education increase funding to ensure every Kindergarten class is staffed with a full-time certified teacher and a designated early childhood educator.
- That the Ministry of Education increase funding for early reading intervention services, special education services, resources, professional development, and staffing for children in Year 1 and 2 of Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2.

No supports in the inclusion model

The Ontario Ministry of Education's IPRC placement policy favours the inclusion of exceptional children in the regular classroom. In 2000, almost 80 per cent of children with special needs were in regular classes for at least part of the day. Over 20 years later that number has increased, with approximately 87 per cent of children with special education needs in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day, according to 2021-22 data from the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS).

In Education that Fits: Review of International Trends in the Education of Children with Special Education Needs (2010), David Mitchell provides evidence from research that shows children's learning is enhanced by their peers. Mitchell explains that this learning can be supported by group work that provides intentional opportunities for children to discuss and collaborate.

Data collected by Robert S. Brown and Gillian Parekh for a TDSB special education research report published in 2010 demonstrated that children identified with a learning disability and enrolled in the general program fared better academically than children with the same designation enrolled in self-contained programs.

"All those children that were in self-contained programs became accustomed to having people who were in their corner on a daily basis. And now they're in these huge populations where they don't necessarily have access to that same support, and they are not reacting to it well. We are dealing with a lot more behaviours because we just don't have the resources to contend with them. We have one mainstream EA in our school of 801."

– Special Education Resource Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

As we've established, however, there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to special education, and not everyone agrees the inclusion model is the best choice for all children. Online education-focused newsroom The Hechinger Report was provided a draft copy of a new research paper entitled Reframing the Most Important Special Education Policy Debate in Fifty Years: How versus Where to Educate Children with Disabilities in America's Schools. The paper, by researchers Douglas Fuchs, Allison Gilmour, and Jeanne Wanzek, is expected to appear this spring in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

The paper's authors argue that research on including children with disabilities in general education classrooms is weak, flawed, and no conclusions can be drawn from the evidence. The Hechinger story notes that the Campbell Collaboration, an international non-profit organization, also concluded that the benefits of inclusion were inconsistent and inconclusive after reviewing research for public policy purposes.

The Hechinger article concludes that unfortunately, current research cannot definitively say whether a separate classroom or inclusion model is best. What we can be sure of is that the inclusion model in Ontario is not working.

The ETFO special education focus groups conducted in 2024 found that teachers strongly believe the current inclusion model fails children, families, and educators. In the words of multiple participants, "inclusion without proper support is abandonment."

The rollout of integration models in schools looks vastly different in practice from the theoretical best practices on which they may have been based. Mainstream class sizes are too large to effectively support the inclusion of children with special needs, particularly when factoring in the absence of appropriate human and other resources that adequately address learning challenges. Teachers see "inclusion" as a thinly veiled resource-cutting measure.

Ontario teachers are not alone in their concern over inclusion models for special education in a climate of reduced support.

"The needs are not reflective of the provincial numbers. The provincial government thinks the rate of autism is one in 63. In one of my schools, the rate is one in 22; in another of my schools the rate is one in 14. The provincial government does not fund at that rate. We don't have specialized schools for kids to go to. For some children – grade 6, non-verbal, non-toilet-trained – their only option is a regular class placement."

– DECE Member, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

In January 2025, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) released the initial findings from the first edition of their new pan-Canadian educator survey series, *Parachute*. Participants included 5,000 teachers, principals, educational assistants, and support workers.

Five key areas of concern emerged: lack of ministerial support, untenable working conditions, class size and complexity, rising incidents of violence and aggression, and overwork and lack of preparation time.

Of particular relevance within the context of special education and inclusion, the survey revealed:

- 77 per cent of educators reported that children's needs have become "significantly more complex" compared to five years ago.
- The number of children, in particular those requiring substantial support, without adequate support, along with the diversity of their needs, are the main factors contributing to classroom challenges.
- Children requiring special education support are being systematically left behind, exacerbating inequities in the classroom.

These findings underscore why the inclusion model has been a priority for ETFO at the central bargaining table, resulting in the negotiated Letter of Agreement #9 in the 2019-2022 teacher/occasional teacher collective agreement.

The Letter created the Support for Students Committee, comprised of representatives from ETFO, Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA), and the Ministry of Education, which collaborated on *Supporting Children Toward Successful Integration*, a document that was shared with district school boards in 2021. As a result of the 2022-26 central collective agreement, the report was re-issued in January 2024.

The committee defined the following key components of understanding integration:

- Integration is a type of placement for children who require special education services or supports in school settings and other educational environments and includes age-appropriate peers, beyond congregated special education settings.
- Integration involves educational settings where the program and learning environment are adapted to meet the individual needs of a student.
- Integration is guided by a formal process, the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). Integration is supported by the In-School Support Team, which implements and monitors the decisions of the IPRC and facilitates seamless transitions and supports for students.
- Integration is purposefully planned based on the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) which details the accommodations, modifications, and supports/services to best meet the learning strengths, needs and interests of a student.

To bring *Supporting Children Toward Successful Integration* to life, in the fall of 2024, ETFO and OPSBA began to compile a list of evidence-based and research-informed practices, including resources, which have been scaled in district school boards across the province to support success for children with disabilities both academically and socially during periods of inclusion. The process of determining best practices remains ongoing and challenging because of the variability of both learners and of special education supports that exist across the province.

It is in our best interest to heed the conclusion of chapter 1: special education has always worked best when it has listened to parents, served children's best interests, and respected the rights of both. As Luigi Iannacci reminds us in *Reconceptualizing Disability in Education*, inclusion is not, nor should it ever be, understood as a geographic location in a school, such as a "regular" classroom. Instead, inclusion means offering a range of placement options that are responsive to children.

Now more than ever, class size matters

Lower class sizes and adequate staffing levels are essential to the inclusion model. Unfortunately, Ontario is losing teachers at an alarming rate, and classes are getting bigger.

An analysis of the technical papers that provide the number of classroom educators per 1,000 children from the 2018-2019 and 2024-2025 school years reveals that there are 1,600 fewer kindergarten educators and 1,000 fewer teachers in grades 4 to 8 as of this school year:

	2018-2019 school Year	2024-2025 school year	High School Graduation
Kindergarten	95 educators per 1000 children	90 educators per 1000 children	62.6%
Grades 4 to 8	54 teachers per 1000 children	52 teachers per 1000 teachers	74.0%
Source: *Ontario has lost 5,000 classroom educators since 2018* by Ricardo Tranjan, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives			

The following table provides the estimated total cuts in classroom staffing across the province for the 2024-25 school year, due to funding changes since 2018-2019. The numbers represent classroom educators:

District School Board	Kindergarten	Grades 1 to 8	Grades 9 to 12	Total per board
Algoma	-7	-5	-14	-25
Avon Maitland	-8	-6	-15	-29
Bluewater	-14	-9	-20	-43
Ontario North East	-4	-3	-12	-19
Durham	-57	-38	-95	-190
Grand Erie	-21	-14	-32	-67
Greater Essex County	-24	-17	-46	-88
Halton	-41	-33	-84	-157
Hamilton-Wentworth	-40	-26	-59	-124
Hastings and Prince Edward	-11	-7	-18	-37
Kawartha Pine Ridge	-28	-17	-42	-87
Keewatin Patricia	-3	-2	-6	-11
Lakehead	-7	-4	-10	-21
Lambton Kent	-15	-10	-28	-54
Limestone	-14	-9	-27	-50
Near North	-7	-5	-12	-24
Ottawa-Carleton	-51	-36	-101	-187
Peel	-107	-73	-165	-345
Rainbow	-9	-6	-19	-34
Rainy River	-1	-1	-3	-5
Renfrew County	-6	-4	-12	-23
Simcoe County	-42	-27	-68	-137
Superior-Greenstone	-1	0	-2	-3
Thames Valley	-61	-41	-97	-199
Toronto	-173	-110	-295	-578
Trillium Lakelands	-12	-8	-22	-42
Upper Canada	-20	-13	-34	-67
Upper Grand	-26	-17	-45	-87
Waterloo	-47	-30	-83	-160
York	-72	-64	-173	-309

Source: *Ontario has lost 5,000 classroom educators since 2018* by Ricardo Tranjan, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Previous investments in smaller classes have had a positive impact on our classrooms. Ontario-based research demonstrates that smaller Primary classes have enabled teachers to provide more individual attention to children and a greater variety of instructional strategies.

Currently, Primary grades are funded for an average class size of 20 and secondary grades for an average class size of 23. By comparison, funding for grades 4 to 8 supports a class size average of 24.5. As Ontario seeks to address existing learning gaps, reducing class sizes is a necessary first step.

But establishing limits on class size average alone without hard caps means that individual classes can vary a great deal. Unlike in the Primary grades, there are currently no caps on class size for grades 4 to 8. This has resulted in the largest class sizes in the system, often with more than 30 children.

For classrooms to be truly inclusive, class size must be considered in conjunction with class composition and children's diverse needs. Class size reduction was ranked as the highest spending priority in seven of the eight Canadian Teachers' Federation surveys conducted between 1995 and 2008.

In the early school years, it is recognized that the benefits of smaller classes are greater when class sizes are reduced to 20 or less. While developing accessibility standard recommendations for the Ministry of Education, the K–12 Education Standards Development

"The needs of kids in self-contained spec ed classes have gotten so much more extreme. 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, self-contained classroom, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

Committee heard a great deal of feedback on the pressing need to reduce class size. This feedback suggested that smaller class sizes would support more effective instruction, inclusion, and increase the capacity to create and implement a Universal Design of Learning (UDL) that would lead to more effective student outcomes in student achievement and health and well-being.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education amend Regulation 132/12 of the *Education Act* and cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24 children.
- That the Ministry of Education amend Regulation 132/12 of the *Education Act* and cap Kindergarten class size at 26 children.

Barriers to accessing programs

The results of psychological tests are often required by schools, and by extension the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC), to identify if a student has an exceptionality and determine a placement and needed special education supports.

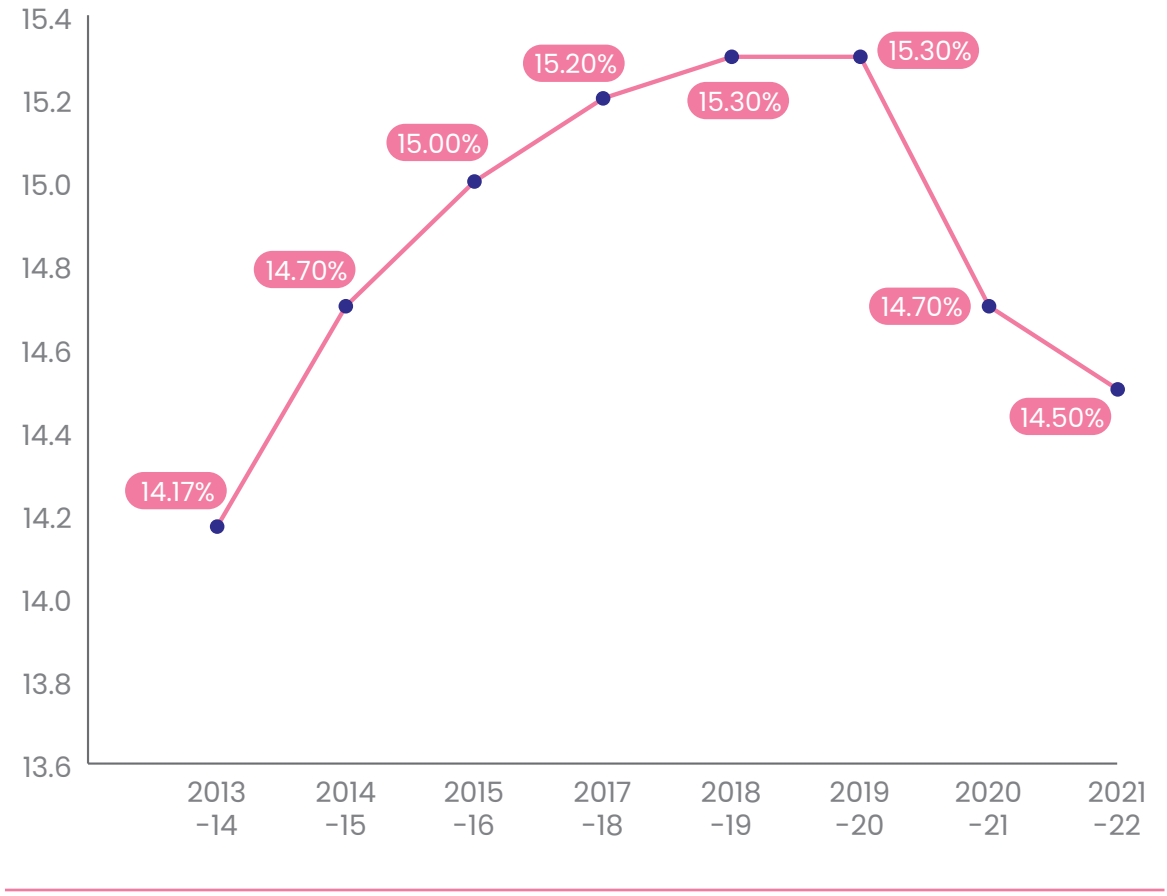
Data collected by ETFO between 2013 and 2022 reveals a steady increase in the number of children requiring special education supports and being granted IEPs, even as the number of IPRCs has declined.

This is a troubling trend. While IEPs are critical for students with special needs to succeed, the IPRC is the only way to guarantee that a child receives the supports they require, in accordance with the *Education Act* and related regulations.

People for Education reported in 2017 that an estimated 37,000 children in Ontario were waiting for professional assessment and/or a special education placement through an IPRC. That translates to an average of nine children per elementary school.

In Responding to Special Education Student Need in Ontario (2018), Horizon Educational Consulting notes it is common knowledge that parents can wait up to two years for psycho-educational assessment for their child in the publicly funded education system.

Percentage of Students Receiving Special Education Programs and/or Services - Elementary Panel



*Source: ETFO, compiled from the annual Guides to the Special Education Fund. *Data for the 2016-17 school year was not available. The decrease in children receiving special education programs and/or services during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the remote/online delivery of instruction.*

These long waiting lists exist because of the increasing number of schools with no access to a psychologist. When ETFO released *Fulfilling the Promise* in 2002, 12 per cent of schools did not have access to a psychologist. According to People for Education's 2023-24 survey, that number has doubled to 24 per cent. In addition to limited access to school psychologists, 60 per cent of elementary schools report restrictions on the number of special education assessments completed each year.

Long wait times are compounded by a lack of documentation, communication, or follow-up with families by the district school board about their child's position or how it changes, on the wait-list (Horizon, 2018).

Understandably, many parents do not want to wait years for their child to receive special education supports, so those who can afford to pay for private testing do so and bring the results to the school so that an IPRC can be scheduled more quickly. In her book *Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada*, Sue Winton warns us that privatization is not a phenomenon that just happens, it is a process. Private psychological testing is just one way parents are actively privatizing public education and shifting toward prioritizing individual benefits over collective ones.

Even though cognitive testing is only a snapshot of a student's strengths and needs, when combined with classroom-based assessments it provides important insight for teachers when writing IEPs or advocating for special education support.

Parents must aggressively seek support from all sectors of the education and health care communities to obtain, often at their own expense, the documentation required to prove that their children meet the criteria for special education programs and services. Not all parents have the time or resources to conduct this kind of information gathering and advocacy.

"We're allowed, no matter what the size of the school is – and ours is a large school – two psychological assessments a year. It has been like that for a long time. That's to cut down on our wait-list for our psychologists, but then we don't have those services for the assessment. We're lacking in psychometrists and psychologists to do those identifications."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

"We're lacking in psychometrists and psychologists to do those identifications. The pressure is on the parents to get those done privately and interpreted. Then that creates a two-tiered system. We are seeing fewer identification [as a result], and so we don't even have the right equipment or understanding of how to program for those needs. We also have a lot of parents going outside and getting occupational therapy and speech supports as well because the wait-lists are excessive, like over two years."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

Barriers to a special education placement continue even after a child has received an psycho-educational assessment. Parents, teachers, and schools want to work together to provide the most responsive programs and placements for children. However, the statistical model for special education funding and the political climate of austerity puts parents and schools in a difficult position.

In addition, parents are often confused and feel betrayed because support previously provided has been withdrawn with little or no recognition of what their child continues to need.

Appropriate placement decisions require collaborative decision-making between parents, teachers, administrators, and other relevant professionals at an IPRC. While general classroom placement is the first consideration of the IPRC, it is not necessarily the only or best placement option for all children at every stage of their educational career. In addition to unsatisfactory learning conditions, inappropriate placement can result

in unsafe conditions for children and school personnel. School and board policies should be written and implemented to ensure the health and safety of all children and staff when integration of children with special education needs takes place.

A June 2024 article published by The Trillium (Duggal, 2024) summarized special education program closures across the province. These included District School Board Ontario North East, which announced it was closing a high-support self-contained classroom in Hearst, and the Peel District School board, which is cutting communication classes that offer specialized literacy supports for children.

In January, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board released details of proposed changes to its elementary program model, which include phasing out the following programs. These changes will affect approximately 400 children:

"We have [operated under a] full inclusion [model] for 10 years. We lost special education classes but with no significant increase in supports at the school level."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

Program name	Number of classes closing	Class size
General Learning Program – Junior	6	16 children/class
Gifted Program – Primary	1	Up to 20 children/class
Language Learning Disabilities Program – Primary and Junior	11	10 children/class
Learning Disabilities Specialized Intervention Program – Junior and Intermediate	14	8 children/class
Primary Special Needs Program	7	10 children/class

Source: *Elementary Program Review and Special Education Plan 2022-2023*, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

A team of researchers from three universities was assembled to review the Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) program within the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) in the fall of 2023. The resulting report recommended that any restructuring of the RISE program should be done with consideration to the impact on current children, families, and educators. A shift to an inclusion model should be rolled out over three to five years and involve continued investment, not removal, of financial, human, and technological resources.

This is not what is happening. In November 2024, the school board trustees voted in favour of a multi-year financial recovery plan to help make up a $6.3 million dollar deficit. Making up the shortfall included the elimination of the RISE program.

In response to this action, Joanna Conrad, a member of the Greater Essex County Special Education Advisory Committee, told the CBC, "We already are at an extreme staff shortage in the schools. How are we going to support these students? If they remove psych assessments, if they remove … speech pathology. If they remove all of these types of services that are provided — that's never coming back" (CBC, 2024).

To ensure student learning needs are being fulfilled, district school boards often undertake these types of program reviews using independent researchers. However, with decades of chronic underfunding of education in Ontario, the reviews are now being conducted in a politically charged climate that pits program protection – and special education programming in particular – against budget austerity. This was the experience acknowledged by the researchers who conducted the program review in Greater Essex County.

The ETFO special education focus group participants observed that as standalone and self-contained special education classrooms have closed, children have moved or returned to mainstream classrooms without the level of support provided in standalone programs. Supportive services – professional support that is, rather than accessibility tools – disappear entirely or in large part when children who once qualified for congregated placements move into or are placed in mainstream classrooms. Teachers worry parents have misconceptions of the amount of support their children receive in moving from congregated to mainstream programs.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding that ensures all children with exceptionalities have access to the full range of special education placements that meet their needs, from full withdrawal to full integration, with accompanying services, programs, and resources.
- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to increase special education teachers and educators for children to receive the direct support necessary to meet their needs.

"I taught a composite class, a group of 12 kids from grades 3 to 8. They were all at least three grade levels below. I would withdraw them for half days. I would work with them intensively for language and math, so that they were starting to catch up. I had that class for two years. It was wonderful; the kids grew so much, and I absolutely loved what I was doing because I could see the growth in the kids. And then the board decided that withdrawing was a bad thing. They shut down the composite classes, because the kids were being 'singled out,' is what they said. The kids used to come to me because they felt safe, it was a safe place to work and to make mistakes. Now the kids are back in [mainstream classrooms], but the SERT is spread so thin that we only get support through brainstorming ideas. There's no follow-up when we say it's not working."

– Regular Classroom Teacher with a background in special education, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

Limited resources and support services

"In 2006, my school had around 600 kids, about 80 IEPs and 12 to 14 EAs. We had a variety of special education classes and maybe one violent incident per year. In 2023, we have the same number of children and IEPs, but with much more severe needs and only five EAs and one special education class."

– Special Education Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

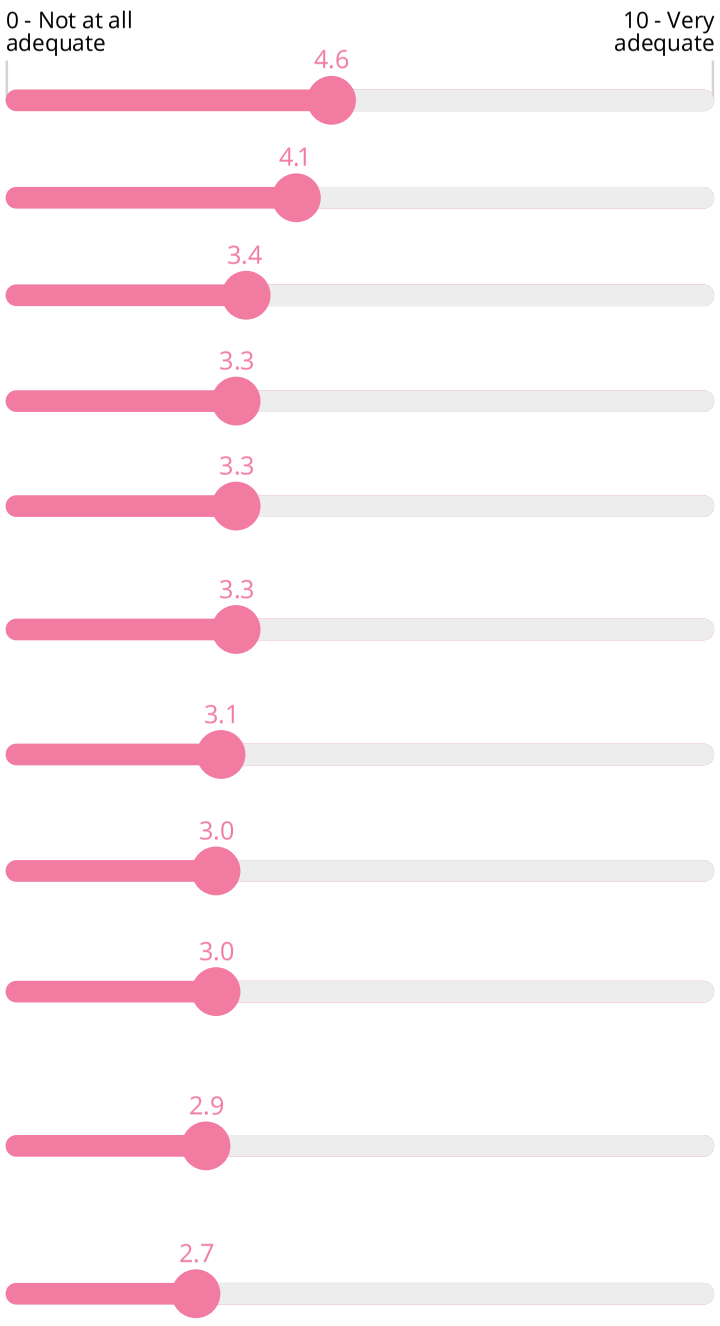
Adequate support services, appropriate teaching and learning materials, and other resources such as assistive technology are necessary to help children reach their full potential. However, through the ETFO's 2024 special education focus groups, 2023 all-member violence survey, and annual membership survey, ETFO members have expressed that available resources are far from adequate.

Focus group participants report feeling overwhelmed; that students' support needs far exceed actual capacity. They noted that the availability of special education services and supports has declined despite an increase in demand. At the very least, available supports – professional staff supports in particular – have failed to keep pace.

Over the last five years, ETFO members reported that access to assistive technology, professional development, and time to collaborate with colleagues has never even approached adequacy.

The lack of educational assistant support was also reflected in the 2023 ETFO violence survey. A majority of ETFO members reported that educational assistants (61%), social workers (56%) and child and youth workers (53%) were available only "some of the time," "rarely," or "never" when needed in the 2022-2023 school year.

Overall low adequacy of resources for spec ed students



	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Access to assistive/ adaptive equipment	4.5	4.3	4.7	5.0	4.9	4.5
Access to culturally relevant and responsive resources	4.1	-	-	-	-	-
Allocation of/ access to special education teachers	3.2	3.1	3.7	3.8	3.5	2.9
Access to assessments by professional/ paraprofessional support personnel	3.1	3.0	3.6	3.9	3.7	3.3
Access to program planning resources for students with special needs	3.2	-	-	-	-	-
Allocation of/ access to paraprofessional/ professional support personnel	3.1	3.0	3.4	3.3	3.2	2.4
Professional develpoment/ training provided by your board(s)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Time to collaborate with staff/ personnel	-	-	-	-	-	-
Allocation of/access to support personnel (e.g., Educational Assistants, Child and Youth Workers)	2.8	2.7	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.1
Access to paraprofessional/ professional support personnel (representative of the student's racial/ cultural identity)	2.8	2.7	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.1
Access to a range of placements for students with special needs	2.5	2.6	3.2	3.1	2.9	2.4

The Special Equipment Allocation (SEA) under the current Ministry funding model is allocated to school boards to purchase various assistive devices (including software, computers and computer-related devices), supporting furniture, and other non-computer-based equipment to be used by identified students with special education needs.

In theory, this should help ensure that children with disabilities have access to the assistive technology they need to be fully integrated within the regular classroom setting. The reality is the SEA claim application process creates many barriers and even when requests are approved, there can be significant delays in receiving the equipment, as reported by ETFO members during the 2024 special education focus groups:

"We have a child in an electric wheelchair. We have a desk for him on order. He's been in our school for five years, but apparently, we are just now getting him a desk that can fit his chair. We are also still waiting for technology so that he can use speech-to-text to do his work." – Regular Classroom Teacher

"We wait months and months and months for kids to get the services they need. In my class, I have a student who would be classified as deaf and hard of hearing. We see our deaf and hard of hearing teacher probably twice in the year. If we have equipment that's not functioning, that kid is not hearing because they are just not getting to us." – Regular Classroom Teacher

"In the 20 years that I have been teaching in Ontario, I have seen a real decline in the amount of support staff we have. We have been told by admin that EAs are only there for safety, and they're only there for toileting or health needs. Aside from that, EAs are not giving any type of academic support or any type of further support. It's a real disappointment"

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

In her book *Ableism in Education: Rethinking School Practices and Policies*, Gillian Parekh argues that access to accommodations is not necessarily synonymous with inclusion, and that **how** accommodations are made available is equally important. She gives the example of providing laptops to all students in a class so those who require them for accommodations aren't singled out or stigmatized. Normalizing accommodations should also be extended to other technology, such as but not limited to having FM systems and closed-captioning in every classroom.

ETFO member surveys also report inadequate access to personnel:

- 77 per cent of ETFO members report in-class supports have decreased during their time in the public school system, including 50 per cent who say they have decreased significantly
- 69 per cent of ETFO members report in-school supports like child and youth and guidance counsellors have decreased, including 35 per cent who say they have decreased significantly
- 60 per cent of ETFO members report board supports in the form of behaviour specialist and itinerant staff have decreased, including 34 per cent who say they have decreased significantly

"I have a student with cerebral palsy who has mobility issues. She previously has had an EA with her full time in order to access specialized programming, but they pulled her EA to follow behaviour children. Now she has no support at all, which means she's just not participating in the class."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

A majority of ETFO members reported that educational assistants (61 per cent), social workers (56 per cent) and child and youth workers (53 per cent) were available only "some of the time," "rarely," or "never" when needed in the 2022-23 school year. Additionally, the vast majority of ETFO members believe that children who have been allocated support from an educational assistant still require greater support.

Focus group participants reported that special education resource teachers (SERTs) are often reassigned to cover staff absences or other unfilled roles, or to cover prep periods, pulling them away from what little time they have with children with special education needs. They are also called on in times of crisis to help de-escalate children engaging in destructive behaviours or to help with medically fragile children. Additionally, a significant amount of SERT time is filled with paperwork and other administrative tasks rather than on direct student support.

"Special education teachers in my school who provide in-class or withdrawal support really want to be there to support children, but so much teaching time seems to be taken away when they are constantly being required to do more paperwork, fill out more forms, participate in meetings. They just want to support children, but there's so many other aspects of withdrawal that can become overwhelming."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

"For the last few years, our board seems to be having difficulty just staffing enough EAs. We hire community members and call them monitors. They have no specific training, no specialized education to support children. They are just people from the community who are willing to accept a paid position at the school just to be a body in the room."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

A shortage of available SERTs is one issue. A dearth in educational assistants is another. Low pay and poor working conditions have created gaps in the workforce and made it much more difficult to fill open educational assistant roles, even when boards are willing to hire additional EA support. In response, untrained/unqualified community members are brought in as "monitors" to fill EA roles in boards where staffing is an issue.

Despite more educational assistant support needed in our schools, the federal government removed early childhood educators and educational assistants from Canada's Post-Graduation Work Permit (PGWP) Program in 2022.

On February 27, 2025, the federal government reversed this decision and Mark Miller, Federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship reinstated the field of education as an express entry category that allows international students to remain in Canada and work temporarily for up to three years.

ETFO applauds this policy change, however, the overall recruitment and retention of early childhood educators and educational assistants must be considered to ensure the ongoing supports students need.

For years, disability advocates have been sounding the alarm about how insufficient resources and supports in schools often result in children with disabilities being excluded from the classroom because their needs cannot be accommodated. There are two types of exclusions:

- Hard exclusions involve formal processes where the school completes official paper work. These hard exclusions may include suspensions or expulsions.
- Soft exclusions occur without a formal documentation and often go untracked. Examples of soft exclusions involve the school asking parents to pick up their student early, or sending the student home regularly, due to a lack of accommodations required by a student's IEP (Ontario Autism Coalition, 2025).

People for Education has been tracking this reality for the last decade. According to their 2024 Annual Report on Access to Special Education, the number of principals who asked parents if their student with special needs could stay home instead of attending school because of insufficient supports has steadily increased – from 48 per cent in 2014 to 58 per cent in 2018 and 63 per cent in 2024.

The recent OAC Special Education Survey Report provided even more detailed statistics. For example, in the 2023-24 school year, six per cent of families reported that their child **should** have attended a school but were either involuntarily or voluntarily fully excluded. Of these families, 73 per cent said the main reason for full exclusion was that needed accommodations were not available.

Another 37 per cent of families indicated their child was excluded from various elements of the school experience. These included:

- 16 per cent of families reported that children were excluded from recess or other parts of the school day due to a lack of available support.
- 15 per cent of families received a call from the school to pick up their child as the school was unable to support them for the remainder of the day.
- 13 per cent of families indicated their child was not allowed to participate in a school field trip or other school-related event.
- 9 per cent of families indicated that they were contacted prior to school starting that day and told to keep their child home as the school did not have proper supports available to keep them safe.
- 6 per cent of families indicated their child was excluded from full-time school and placed on a modified schedule due to a lack of available support.
- 3 per cent of families indicated their child was excluded for a set period with formal paperwork.
- 10 per cent of families indicated other.

"When I started teaching there was EA support assigned to a single student. Now the support is assigned to the school and the support person is running from room to room, leaving to toilet other children."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

These exclusions are allowed under provincial law when, according to the principal's judgement, a student's presence is determined to be "detrimental to the physical or mental well-being of the pupils." Advocates argue that these exclusions are used for children with special needs who cannot be disciplined for behaviour that results from their disability or a failure to accommodate it. Exclusions are distinct from suspensions and expulsions.

These requests to keep children home are often undocumented. This has become an issue for advocacy groups when demanding more funding and supports from the government. The province began collecting exclusion data during the 2021-22 school year. However, disability advocates say the data is incomplete, inconsistent, and the numbers observed are alarmingly high (Smith Cross, 2023).

Inclusion Action in Ontario, a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to the inclusion of children with disabilities in education and community, argues that these exclusions are not only very disruptive for the child, but also for the family:

"More often than not, mothers in particular bear the brunt of these exclusions, by having their workday interrupted frequently. Eventually, employers lose patience. Rather than fight a second human rights battle at work, mothers drop out of the workforce altogether, or radically alter their working life. The consequences to her and the family can be enormous."

This is a clear example of deteriorating funding, poor policy, and how the ongoing history of special education hides inequity.

Specialist teachers and teacher-librarians are also integral to helping children with special education needs thrive. Teachers with specialized training in physical education, guidance, and the arts greatly enrich the educational experience and lead to a broader range of extra-curricular activities at the school level.

A study by Queen's University and People for Education conducted on behalf of the Ontario Library Association observed that the presence of a teacher-librarian in a school was the single strongest predictor of reading enjoyment by students, and that library staffing is associated with an increase in reading performance (Ontario Library Association, 2006).

In 1998, 80 per cent of schools had a teacher-librarian. Almost 20 years later, People for Education observed that only 52 per cent of elementary schools had a teacher-librarian (People for Education, 2017).

That number is likely to decline further. With the Core Education Funding model introduced by the Ford government for the 2024-25 school year, money that was previously earmarked for school libraries and library staff is now pooled into a broader "learning resources fund," which is also allocated for guidance and mental-health workers.

The Core Education Funding model also eliminates accountability measures that ensured money for libraries is spent on libraries. Given that so many district school boards are facing difficult budgetary decisions, it is easy to see how libraries and library staff are now even more vulnerable. These cuts come at the expense of our children's learning experiences.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to school boards for the purchase of technology devices on a 1:1 basis for children in Grade 4 and above.
- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to school boards for the hiring of additional behavioural therapists, child and youth workers, educational assistants, guidance counsellors, psychologists, registered nurses, school support counsellors, social workers, special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, teacher-librarians and other specialized teachers to support culturally relevant and responsive support to children.
- That the Ministry of Education provide adequate funding to school boards to ensure availability of appropriately trained staff to fill absences.

Increased school violence because of unmet student needs

In a Fall 2018 *ETFO Voice* article examining the issue of violence in the classroom, Darcy Santor and Chris Bruckert, authors of *Facing the Facts: The Escalating Crisis of Violence Against Elementary School Educators in Ontario*, note that "the predictable result of government budget cuts in education is unsatisfactory staffing levels and frustrated, struggling children who lash out."

This sentiment is echoed in *Troublemakers, Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* by Carla Shalaby, who urges us to consider disruptive, hyper-visible, and problematic behaviours as both the loud sound of student suffering and a signal that there is poison in our chronically underfunded educational system.

"When we talk about behaviour it is really communication. 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, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

Respondents to the ETFO's 2023 all-member violence survey[4] reported an increase in the number and severity of violent incidents in elementary schools. More than three quarters (77 per cent) of ETFO members have personally experienced violence or witnessed violence against another staff person. This is an increase from the 70 per cent reported in 2017.

Violence survey focus group participants attest to having witnessed a significant uptick in workplace violence over the course of their time in education, and point to four underlying factors driving safety concerns:

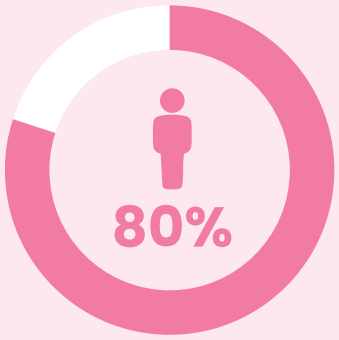
- Declining funding to Ontario's public schools, including and especially for children with special needs.
- Increasing number and severity of children with complex neurological, developmental and behavioural needs in public school and in mainstream classrooms.
- Declining supports in schools for children with special needs, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, occurred simultaneously with a greater emphasis on including children with special education needs in regular classrooms.
- Declining ability of educators and administrators to hold children involved in violent incidents accountable for the actions.

Educators working with younger children are more likely to experience violence, and 86 per cent of members who work in special education have personally experienced violence or witnessed violence against another staff person.

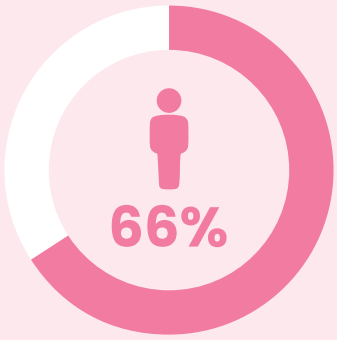
"I don't think parents, or the public have a good understanding of what violence looks like in our schools."

– Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

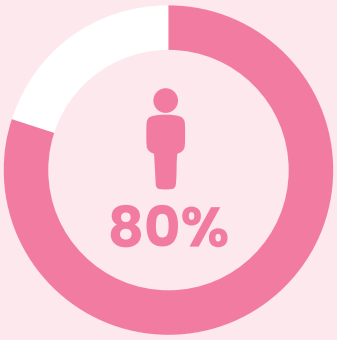
[4] Unless otherwise noted, statistics, graphics, and some text in this section are drawn from the 2023 ETFO All-Member Violence Survey Results report prepared by Stratcom on ETFO's behalf.



Number of violent incidents has increased

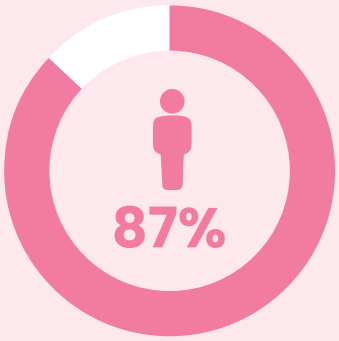


Severity has increased

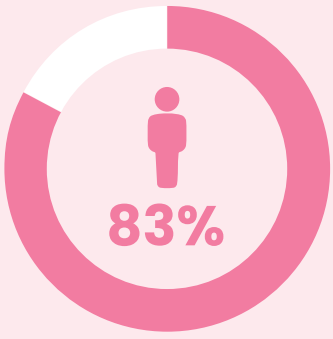


Violence is a growing problem

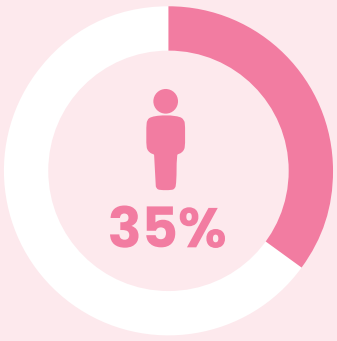
Four out of five members (80 per cent) state that there are more incidents of violence in schools since they started working in the Ontario public elementary school system, and two-thirds of members (66 per cent) say the severity of violent incidents has increased. Most members (80 per cent) agree that "violence is a growing problem" at their school. Almost three-quarters of members (72 per cent) state the number of violent incidents has increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Negative impact on teaching/working



Negative impact on classroom management



Participated in a classroom evacuation

Violence is disrupting teaching, working, and learning conditions. Almost all members are feeling the negative impacts on teaching and working conditions, with 87 per cent of members agreeing that violence in elementary schools is "making teaching more difficult" and 83 per cent saying that violence "interferes with classroom management." Just over a third of ETFO members (35 per cent) participated in a classroom evacuation during the 2022-23 school year. This increases to 40 per cent for ETFO members who work in Kindergarten.

Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of ETFO members say that school administrators do not take the problem of violence in elementary schools as seriously as they should. Additionally, only 36 per cent of members who reported incidents of violence indicated that there was follow-up or investigation "in all cases" or "in some cases." This is a significant decrease from 50 per cent reported in 2017. When there were follow-up actions to prevent the recurrence of violent incidents, only eight per cent of members rated those actions as effective.

Lack of documentation continues to thwart advocacy and action. In the 2023 all-member violence survey and focus groups, ETFO members reported they have been discouraged by school administrators from filling out violent and serious student incident reports. Members have been told by administrators that reports do not help, largely go unread at the board level, and will not result in additional EA support, as there is no funding.

The same is true with regards to incidents involving children with exceptionalities. Some members have been told that if the physical behaviour and/or violence is associated with a student's diagnosis, the reports are not necessary or may not impact the supports provided. Moreover, educators say they are often treated as though they are to blame for student incidents when they do file reports.

"Just a few weeks ago, I got bit, and the worst part of it is, the administration told me not to report it. When I got hit with a concrete object, another teacher told me not to report it, not to tell the student's father, and not to tell the administration. They said they are already aware of it. I did report it for obvious reasons – if there is no paper trail, that student is not going to get the support they need."

– Occasional Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

"There is a part of me that can say, 'Okay this child is trying to communicate, that's why they are hitting me.' But when I am hit by a student now, even if I can rationally say they didn't mean to hit me, they don't have the words, it doesn't matter. I am still being hit by a small child. But I am being told, 'This is autism and it's just his baseline behaviour so please don't report it.' I don't feel heard. I don't feel supported."

– Kindergarten Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

The costs to Ontario's education system in learning loss and injury because of workplace violence is significant. Violent incidents in schools disrupt student learning, often repeatedly, as well as educators' ability to manage classroom environments or perform effectively in their jobs. This is in addition to the significant psychological harm inflicted on educators and children and their sense of safety and well-being.

More than two-in-five members (42 per cent) suffered a physical injury/illness or psychological injury/illness because of workplace violence against them in the 2022-23 school year.

Some violence survey respondents were out on sick leave, long-term disability, or unpaid leave, with the majority indicating experiences of school-based violence contributed to or were wholly responsible for their leave.

Of members who experienced a physical workplace injury due to violence, 17.4 per cent missed work and 25.6 per cent sought medical attention. All of these should have been WSIB claims, but only 13.2 per cent filed a claim.

Of members who experienced a psychological workplace injury due to violence, 19.2 per cent were absent from work and 12.6 per cent sought medical attention, but only 1.4 per cent submitted a WSIB claim.

In 2014 and 2018, ETFO analyzed available WSIB data on the effect of workplace violence on Lost Time Injury (LTI). The 2014 WSIB data indicated that "teacher assistants" had a higher rate of LTIs for workplace violence than police officers. By 2018, teaching assistants' LTIs increased by 133 per cent, compared to 20 per cent for police officers.

There is a financial impact to lost time injuries in Ontario. In 2007, the direct cost (WSIB) premiums of a new lost time injury were on average $21,300 per claim and the indirect cost of each lost time injury claim, including, but not limited to, re-hiring, re-training, loss of productivity was $85,200. This amount has only increased with inflation.

"Being in our classroom is stressful, having violent kids in our classroom is stressful. And I think for me personally, the stress comes out in that I don't sleep. I had huge anxiety about coming to school some days last year. It was taking a toll on my family life as well, because of all the anxiety."

– Kindergarten Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

Table 5. Top 20 highest count of workplace violence events in PSHSA occupations resulting in lost time injuries (2014 & 2018)

Occupations	2014 Lost Time Injury from workplace violence	2018 Lost Time Injury from workplace violence	Percentage Increase
Elementary and secondary school teacher assistants	272	635	133%
Police officers (except commissioned)	269	322	20%
Nurse aids and orderlies	236	294	25%
Elementary school and kindergarten teachers	87	261	200%
Community and social service workers	197	241	22%
Registered nurses	150	240	60%
Other aides and assistants in support of health services	21	213	914%
Bus drivers and subway and other transit operators	65	161	148%
Ambulance attendants and other paramedical occupations	31	61	91%
Secondary school teachers	33	55	67%
Early childhood educators	25	54	116%
Family, marriage, and other related counsellors	24	49	104%
Social workers	12	48	300%
Security guards and related occupations	12	44	267%
Registered nursing assistants	83	43	Decrease
School principals and administrators of elementary and secondary schools	14	36	157%
Program leaders and instructors in recreation and sport	2	19	850%
Visiting homemakers, housekeepers and related occupations	30	17	Decrease
By-law enforcement and other regulator officers, N.E.C.	8	17	113%

Source: Workplace Safety and Insurance Board data, analyzed by ETFO, available at etfohealthandsafety.ca

"I have a student in my class who is triggered by little things. They will throw chairs, mats, anything in the classroom. I was told by an administrator, "Here's a walkie-talkie. If it happens again, evacuate the class." It's not very helpful knowing they can explode at any minute and the only thing we can do is evacuate. Everyone else's psychological safety is jeopardized."

– Regular Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

The growing prevalence of workplace violence in Ontario's schools has had significant impact on workforce stability – leading to the absence of teachers and education workers from classrooms in the short and long term. It has also led countless more to reconsider their futures in the public education system. For educators, this includes considering work in the private sector, early retirement for teachers, or a career change. Experiences with workplace violence is contributing to and exacerbating chronic recruitment and retention of staff in Ontario's public schools.

Ontario is not alone. In November 2024, the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA) released data obtained through an access to information request that confirmed violence in schools was on the rise. Year over year, reported occurrences of violence and aggression increased by 26 per cent between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years, to an average of 22 incidents per school day. In a press release, NLTA president Trent Langdon noted the insufficient response of the provincial government to the growing crisis: "[We] recognize some initiative government has taken recently in an effort to improve school safety. However, the addition of six teaching and learning assistant positions across over 250 schools is just not going to resolve this issue."

Some provinces are taking action. In October 2024, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development announced it was investing $976,000 in addition to placing 47 new specialized staff in schools as part of a pilot program aimed at addressing and preventing violence in the classroom. The investment followed a report by the province's auditor general, which revealed that incidents of school violence against students and educators had increased province-wide by 60 per cent over the previous seven years, from 17,000 to 27,000 in 2023.

Meanwhile in Ontario, the fall economic statement, released around the same time in October, provided no meaningful new investment to support public education and instead offered $200 rebates to eligible taxpayers and their children at a cost of more than $3 billion. In a press release, ETFO president Karen Brown stated, "It is outrageous that the Ford government is choosing to cut funding for public schools while using Ontarians' own money to attempt to buy their votes. The message is loud and clear: public education does not matter to this government."

The Ontario Ministry of Education has failed to fund Ontario's public schools to the level that would adequately address the learning needs of all children, let alone children who require academic or behavioural interventions. According to ETFO members, funding is required to reverse the trend of increasing rates of violence in Ontario's public schools and ensure safe and effective learning and work environments for educators and children alike.

It is obvious that investing in children, investing in their learning needs, is an investment that benefits everyone. Children in Ontario should not have unmet needs within the education system because of underfunding.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education implement a province-wide strategy to address violence in schools.
- That the Ministry of Education develop and deliver long-term, fully funded, comprehensive, culturally responsive mental health and special education supports for children.
- That the Ministry of Education ensure that district school boards comply with their legal obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* to provide a safe working environment.

Lack of special education supports for English language learners

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines English language learners (ELLs) as "children in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English or is a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario's schools, and who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English. These children may be Canadian born or recently arrived from other countries. They come from diverse backgrounds and school experiences and have a wide variety of strengths and needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8)."

Two policy requirements inform school boards of their responsibilities pertaining to supporting ELLs with possible special education needs, as outlined in English Language Learners ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12:

- School boards will develop a protocol for identifying English language learners who may also have special education needs.
- If information from the student's home country, from initial assessment, or from early teacher observation indicates that the student may have special education needs, the student will be referred to the appropriate school team.

The guide continues:

"Where special education needs have been identified, either in the initial assessment or through later assessments, children are eligible for ESL or ELD services and special education services simultaneously. The administration and interpretation of psycho-educational assessments should be linguistically appropriate (i.e., tests should be administered in the student's dominant language or with the assistance of a bilingual educator whenever possible). As well, assessors should use more than one instrument or set of instruments in considering the learning characteristics and describing the performance of English language learners. Assessors should also consider the student's prior opportunities for learning. The development of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for an English language learner needs to take into consideration both needs related to language learning and needs related to the student's exceptionality."

"We have an itinerant teacher that comes around and supports our board. But she told me the other day that she has at least 150 children and, I think, 18 schools she's supporting. She said she's so stretched thin. I have a student that's a multi-lingual language learner and she said, 'I'll do the assessment, but I may see him once this year.' There's nothing for him other than what I provide for him. I feel defeated."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

The Steps to English Proficiency: A Guide for Users (2015) acknowledges that some English language learners have behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities or special education needs at a similar rate as children who are not English language learners. The determination of whether English language learners may or may not have special education needs is complex work requiring additional and specialized resources, expertise, professional learning, board protocols, and time.

As North American classrooms have become more linguistically diverse, educational research has provided a better understanding of the considerations and equitable approaches required to identify and support ELLs with possible special education needs. Policies in other jurisdictions are beginning to reflect this complex and critical work that must be done with an in-depth understanding of culturally and linguistically responsive practices and an awareness of the risks of overrepresentation or underrepresentation of these children in special education programs.

The Ontario Ministry of Education developed the English Language Learners ESL and ELD Programs and Services Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12 in 2007, in response to the 2005 annual report of the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, which identified gaps and issues faced by English language learners in the Ontario education system.

The Ministry's 2007 ELL policies and procedures were a promising starting point, as they recognized the needs and issues of not supporting ELL children in a timely way with proper assessment and information gathering. However, Ontario has not kept up with the research. People for Education's 2017 annual report observed that there is insufficient support for English language learners with special education needs.

A 2020 report by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), funded by the Ministry of Education, acknowledges that the 2007 ELL policies and procedures, while well intended, have not been well implemented by the Ministry of Education or district school boards.

"We are stretched so thin with the level of needs and the supports that are available. We have one coordinator of our board; it's all assessment and she's available for questions but there's not time to work directly with the children. That's an area where I am lacking in training, is supporting children who are coming in and have to learn English."

– Regular Classroom Teacher with a special education background, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

For example, over the past 15 years, only a handful of boards took advantage of a mainly invitational, application-based program offered by CODE that provided $5,000 per board for project work focused on English language learners with special needs. The small, scattered projects that did result from this funding have not yielded the long-term, systemic program support required to address policy implementation challenges.

There is a lack of transparency regarding protocols in district school boards to help teachers determine if English language learners may need special education support. Only a few district school boards provide information on assessing English language learners' possible special education needs in their special education plans, which creates barriers for families and their children. For boards that do have guidelines and processes, it is unclear how well these function, and if any professional learning is provided to educators or leaders to support this work.

"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 the tricky part. I think that's why boards are hesitant. I think in the past, our ELL children didn't have access to special education because it's hard to tease out. That's just something that eventually boards will have to figure out, because [children] will fall through the cracks if we don't have a system."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

The Ontario Ministry of Education developed the Steps to English Proficiency (STEP) framework for assessing and monitoring English language learners' language acquisition and literacy development across the Ontario curriculum. STEP supports both ESL/ELD and classroom educators in scaffolding instruction to meet the needs of English language learners.

Not all children who have special education needs will come with documents like psychological assessment reports and/or Individual Education Plans (IEPs) when they come to Canada. Even with special education documentation, families may not understand when or how to share these with the school. The STEP framework can be used to gather evidence and support student's English language acquisition who are also experiencing difficulties in their learning.

A 2020 value-for-money audit by the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario was critical of the Ministry of Education and the aging curriculums and resources, including those intended to support English language learners. It could be inferred that to avoid criticism of the aging English language learner resources, the Ministry of Education made the decision to move the STEP framework from the publicly accessible EDUgains website to a restricted virtual learning environment (VLE). This has created a long-standing barrier for both teachers and families to extend their understanding of how English language proficiency develops.

The Right to Read inquiry report specifically acknowledges that multilingual children should not be overlooked when determining which children may need early intervention. Among the inquiry's recommendations are that the Ministry of Education needs to support district school boards,

"I'm automatically supposed to know how to teach an MLL kid how to read. I've received no training in teaching these kids how to read and I've been screaming about it for years and get nothing."

– Regular Classroom Teacher, ETFO 2024 special education focus groups

schools, and educators in recognizing the signs of a reading disability in multilingual children and provide funding, resources, and professional development to ensure timely assessments and interventions.

However, like the Ministry of Education, the Right to Read report falls short of explicitly recommending how these barriers can be dismantled. It does not speak enough to the complexity of this work and specialized knowledge required. The report is not clear enough about the unique types of collaboration required to ensure this work is done without delay and accurately, while also continuing to support the whole learner.

With approximately one-third of children in Ontario schools speaking a language other than English or French, understanding how to support linguistically diverse children in any program is greater now than ever before. The Ontario Ministry of Education must address the systemic barriers that prevent English language learners from the specialized support and considerations required when they may need access to special education programs and services. The dearth in supports, including a knowledge gap in Ontario schools, can be addressed with dedicated focus and increased funding.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided by school boards to support English language learners with special education needs.
- That the Ministry of Education ensure that district school boards spend ESL grants on their intended purpose.
- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding for ongoing high-quality professional development for teachers and education workers supporting ELLs with possible special education needs, to take place within the instructional day.

Inequities for children with disabilities persist

The *Ontario Human Rights Code* came into effect in 1962. The Code affirmed the right to equal access to services, including education, and was the first comprehensive human rights code in Canada. However, it took 20 years to amend the Code and prohibit discrimination based on disability.

Decades of research tell us that access to special education is not equal across Ontario. Social identities such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, type of disability, and geography, among other social identities, can all impact whether a student with special needs is able to access the services and programs that will not just set them up for future success, but also create educational experiences that are joyful, meaningful, and respectful of who they are.

A 2010 demographic review of special education students by the Toronto District School Board found that:

- children from two-parent homes were less likely to be labelled as special needs
- Black children were overrepresented among children labelled with behavioural issues, mild intellectual disability, and developmental disability
- white children were overrepresented when it comes to autism, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and significantly overrepresented in terms of giftedness
- 80 per cent of children with multiple special needs were male

The overrepresentation of boys in special education dates to the auxiliary classes of the Toronto Board of Education in the 1920s. Historians argue that special classes evolved as a convenient way for school officials to deal with "difficult" boys. A set of "backstage rules" was used that allowed auxiliary classes to become a secret dumping ground for pupils with behavioural problems, with or without a disability. Even today, it remains unclear whether an overrepresentation of boys in special education represents a difference in incidence or in identification (Grant, 2014).

On the other side of an overrepresentation of boys in special education is the underrepresentation of girls, who are less likely to receive diagnoses of autism and ADHD, in part because diagnostic criteria may be biased toward male presentation of these conditions (Hare et al, 2024; Law, 2024).

"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, 2024 ETFO special education focus groups

This underdiagnosis is further amplified once additional intersections are present. In the article How Black autistic women and girls are excluded from conversations on resources and research, Katherine Gilyard argues that the research is playing an overdue game of catch-up. Advocates are calling for more inclusive research and diagnostic tools that account for the different ways autism manifests according to race and gender, and more culturally relevant resources and support.

A recent fact sheet by the Ontario Alliance of Black Educators' (ONASBE) highlights racial disparities in student identification in the Toronto District School Board. Student data collected between 2006 and 2011 revealed that almost twice as many Black students (34 per cent) were identified with non-gifted special education needs compared to their white peers (17 per cent). On the flip side of this, only 0.6 per cent of Black students were identified as gifted versus four per cent of their white counterparts (Ontario Alliance of Black Educators, 2023).

In Canada, the most overrepresented children in the special education program are children of Indigenous communities. Sara Grelund, Kent McIntosh, Sterett H. Mercer, and Seth L. May considered the issue of the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the special education program in their article *Examining Disproportionality in School Discipline for Aboriginal Children in Schools Implementing PBIS*. They argue that it is important to look at other factors that play a key role, such as intergenerational trauma, poverty, and disproportionate school discipline practices, and that when looking at these factors, it is also important to understand the history. For example, research has shown that both parents and children have a serious mistrust of the education system due to the implementation of residential schools.

In their 2024 report on access to special education in Ontario, People for Education reports that lower-income neighbourhoods have a greater percentage of children receiving special education supports than higher-income areas (20 per cent vs. 14 per cent). Conversely, schools in lower-income areas have less access to psychologists to perform pyscho-educational assessments, a requirement of the IPRC process.

While parents with higher incomes are more likely to pay for the psychological assessment (90 per cent versus 74 per cent) rather than spend months or even years on waiting lists, schools in lower-income neighbourhoods have higher rates of IEPs for children who have not undergone a formal identification process (94 per cent versus 84 per cent).

Families should not have to pay out of pocket to ensure their children are receiving the education they need. It is the responsibility of the provincial government to adequately fund these services for all children who need them and reduce the inequities that reverberate throughout a person's life.

The effects of inequities in childhood are long-lasting

Investment in special education is an investment in the economic and social health of our province. According to Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024), in 2023 the unemployment rate for persons with disabilities (7.6 per cent) was almost twice as high for those without (4.6 per cent). Once employed, the median hourly average pay of persons with disabilities was 5.5 per cent lower than that of employees without disabilities ($26 versus $27.50).

In April 2024, results from the Canadian Income Survey reported that people with disabilities are twice as likely to live in food insecure households as those without. Although lower income is tied to household food insecurity, the study found that people with disabilities were still at a higher risk even when accounting for income, employment status, education, and other demographic factors. Other pathways through which disability affects food insecurity could be the incursion of higher health-care costs and mobility challenges that hinder their ability to access grocery stores.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate partnered on a joint project to monitor the right to housing of Canadians with disabilities and to identify where improvements are urgently needed. Released in December 2024, their first report provides clear evidence of what people with disabilities in Canada have been saying for many years: their fundamental right to housing is being violated.

Meanwhile, CAMH reports that the prevalence of developmental disabilities in federal correctional institutions is two times that reported in the general population. Those with developmental disabilities served more days in custody and were more likely to incur serious in-prison disciplinary charges compared to people without developmental disabilities (CAMH, 2022).

In April 2024, the Canadian federal government tabled the 2024 budget, which included reforms to the *Canadian Disability Benefits Act*. The goal of this program is to provide financial support for low-income, working-aged people living with disabilities. The payment is meant to supplement the existing provincial and territorial programs rather than create a replacement. The proposed benefits are estimated at $200 dollars a month. Only 600,000 out of 1.4 million Canadians with disabilities living in poverty would be eligible, and according to advocates, the amount is significantly less than is needed.

Ontarians with disabilities face many challenges and barriers, particularly when intersectional identities are present. To combat potential negative outcomes in adulthood and ensure all children are receiving equitable access to the tools, services, and personnel they need to harness their full potential, special education policies must address the needs of the whole child through funding and the embracing of an anti-oppressive framework.

ETFO recommends:

- That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure that district school boards provide a variety of programs for children disadvantaged by intersectional issues that contribute to marginalization, including socioeconomic status, such as but not limited to breakfast and lunch programs, 1:1 technology programs, and free before- and after-school care.
- That the Ministry of Education require district school boards to collect disaggregated race-based data and provide professional development opportunities to eradicate continued over- and underrepresentation within special education.
- That the Ministry of Education commit to increased professional development on the importance of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy as it relates to student engagement and its implications on the special education identification process.

From Student to Teacher – ETFO Members with Disabilities

ETFO members with disabilities share their childhood educational experiences and their thoughts on special education in Ontario today.

Violet has autism and ADHD and entered a general education Grade 1 classroom in New Brunswick in 1990.

Violet's father served in the Canadian military, so she was educated in five provinces: New Brunswick, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. Every province's education system was incredibly different – everything from grade structure to funding to curriculum.

Violet was not diagnosed until adulthood but always knew something was different. She felt most successful in British Columbia. Different ways of learning were valued and the curriculum supported project-based learning, field trips, and outdoor learning. Classrooms were funded to have educational assistant support. It was where she felt most herself.

The transition to Ontario as she entered Grade 7 in 1996 when Mike Harris was implementing the "Common Sense Revolution" was the hardest. To mask her challenges, she doubled down and became obsessed with being successful, both academically and socially. The energy it took to mask was depleting and she now recognizes how she was robbing herself.

As a teacher and as a mother of three children with autism, she painfully feels the chronic underfunding of Ontario's education system. She observes how the Ontario government talks about inclusion and supporting all children – but that talk is not followed up with the appropriate funding.

CONCLUSION

For too long, ETFO has been sounding the alarm about the state of special education in Ontario. After years of funding cuts and policy changes by the Doug Ford Conservative government, 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.

It is important to acknowledge that disability is an uncomfortable subject for many people. But we must face the biases and prejudices of our past and understand how they have manifested in today's special education policies and funding.

As an organization that promotes equity and social justice within the education system and broader society, ETFO supports moving discussions about disability beyond whether children have access to accommodations and modifications and towards acknowledging disability identity, incorporating disability culture, teaching disability history, and challenging all forms of ableism within classroom practices.

ETFO is not alone in recognizing this change must happen. Throughout this report, we have drawn on research and reporting by organizations and individuals, including People for Education, the Ontario Autism Coalition, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, district school boards, experts in education, journalists, academics, and government bodies, which speak to the challenges in special education and in many cases advocate for the same actions and shifts in approach we have expressed in our 27 recommendations.

Underscoring all of this is the input of ETFO members. Through surveys, focus groups, and regular feedback, they have shared the day-to-day realities of classrooms across Ontario. Their frustration and heartbreak at trying to do their best for their students in a system that is seemingly designed to work against them is a testament to their dedication.

As noted by the Ontario Autism Coalition in their 2023-24 special education survey report, "increasing student needs, failure in policy, and chronic underfunding have forced school boards to reduce special education programming, leaving educators, education workers, students, and families to bear the brunt of these challenges."

Special education is failing our children. It is failing the economic and social health of our province. ETFO is urging the Ontario Ministry of Education to adopt our 27 recommendations so that children with disabilities can thrive.

"It comes down to money, and unfortunately this province and its leadership are going in the wrong direction – defunding education. It is not going to get better until politicians take education seriously."

– Special Education Teacher, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

ETFO RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure a full range of responsive special education placements and supports that honour a child as a whole person are available in each district school board.
2. That the Ministry of Education convene a special education committee that includes education stakeholders (including the affiliates) that meets three times during the school year to review and advise on special education policy.
3. That the Ministry of Education engage education unions as full partners in the discussion and implementation of special education at local and provincial levels.
4. That the Ministry of Education allocate increased, ongoing, and sustainable funding for high-quality professional learning for educators in special education and student mental health, to take place within the instructional day.
5. That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding for the creation and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP) including professional development and the development of curriculum-related resources.

6 That the Ministry of Education immediately index special education funding to inflation, address the assessment backlog, and enhance the statistical model.

7 That the Ministry of Education resume the practice of including the breakdown of funding allocations under the education category in the provincial budget.

8 That the Ministry of Education establish an independent, external review of Ontario's education funding formula to ensure it reflects actual student needs and close any funding gaps that may exist by increasing base special education grants.

9 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased enveloped special education funding that is more accessible and allows for more flexibility to meet the wide range of needs of all children throughout the school year.

10 That the Ministry of Education increase funding to ensure every Kindergarten class is staffed with a full-time certified teacher and a designated early childhood educator.

11 That the Ministry of Education increase funding for early reading intervention services, special education services, resources, professional development, and staffing for children in Year 1 and 2 of Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2.

12 That the Ministry of Education amend Regulation 132/12 of the Education Act and cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24 children.

13 That the Ministry of Education amend Regulation 132/12 of the Education Act and cap Kindergarten class size at 26 children.

14 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding that ensures all children with exceptionalities have access to the full range of special education placements that meet their needs, from full withdrawal to full integration, with accompanying services, programs, and resources.

15 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to increase special education teachers and educators for children to receive the direct support necessary to meet their needs.

16 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to school boards for the purchase of technology devices on a 1:1 basis for children in Grade 4 and above.

17 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to school boards for the hiring of additional behavioural therapists, child and youth workers, educational assistants, guidance counsellors, psychologists, registered nurses, school support counsellors, social workers, special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, teacher-librarians, and other specialized teachers to support culturally relevant and responsive support to children.

18 That the Ministry of Education provide adequate funding to school boards to ensure availability of appropriately trained staff to fill absences.

19 That the Ministry of Education implement a province-wide strategy to address violence in schools.

20 That the Ministry of Education develop and deliver long-term, fully funded, comprehensive, culturally responsive mental health and special education supports for children.

21 That the Ministry of Education ensure that district school boards comply with their legal obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* to provide a safe working environment.

22 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided by school boards to support English language learners with special education needs.

23 That the Ministry of Education ensure that district school boards spend ESL grants on their intended purpose.

24 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding for ongoing high-quality professional development for teachers and education workers supporting ELLs with possible special education needs, to take place within the instructional day.

25 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure that district school boards provide a variety of programs for children disadvantaged by intersectional issues that contribute to marginalization, including socioeconomic status, such as but not limited to breakfast and lunch programs, 1:1 technology programs, and free before- and after-school care.

26 That the Ministry of Education require district school boards to collect disaggregated race-based data and provide professional development opportunities to eradicate continued over- and underrepresentation within special education.

27 That the Ministry of Education commit to increased professional development on the importance of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy as it relates to student engagement and its implications on the special education identification process.

APPENDIX 1

Main component	2024-25 allocations	Subcomponent	Allocation rules
SEF - Per Pupil Allocation (SEF-PPA)	$1.87 billion	N/A	Funding is based on enrolment as follows: $1,184.38 × JK-Grade 3 ADE, $909.76 × Grade 4-8 ADE, $599.14 × Grade 9-12 ADE. Intended for staffing, professional development, and learning materials.
Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA)	$1.38 billion	Measures of variability (MOV) component	Distributed based on seven categories and 29 factors using school board data (e.g., EQAO achievement, credit accumulation). Weights are calculated using ranges compared to the provincial average, and funding is proportionally allocated across boards.
		Special Education Statistical Prediction Model (SESPM)	Uses logistic regression to predict children needing special education based on demographic data. Funding is proportional to the board-specific prediction of children needing services relative to the provincial total.

		Collaboration and integration base	Provides each school board a base amount of $536,299.94 to foster collaborative approaches.
		Multi-disciplinary supports	Funds multi-disciplinary teams ($112,077.75 per member, up to 4), with additional flexible staffing resources.
		Local special education priorities	Formula: $123,671.00 + ($4.62 × ADE). For school boards to address specific local priorities
		Early math intervention component	Formula: $118,409.52 + ($0.32 × ADE). Supports early math intervention for elementary children.
		Professional assessments component	Formula: Base ($84,546.81 × 1.23068393) + ($2.13 × ADE). Funds professional assessments to reduce wait times.
Complex Supports Allocation	$330.2 million	Special Incidence Portion (SIP)	Interim formula with $64,000 base per school board plus $2.60 × ADE. Supports children needing more than two full-time staff due to health or safety needs.
		Education and Community Partnership Program (ECPP)	Supports education for children in care, treatment, or detention facilities. Funding covers teachers, assistants, and supplies, based on approved program costs.
		Behaviour expertise component	ABA expertise: $202,789 per board + $6.71 × ADE.
			Training: $1,500 per board + $2.95 × ADE.
			After-school skills development: $56,717 per board + $1.40 × ADE.
Specialized Equipment Allocation	$134.1 million	SEA formula component	Base: $200,000 per board. Per pupil: $51.10 × ADE. Covers equipment under $5,000, training, set up, maintenance, and repair.
		SEA claims-based component	Funds single equipment items over $5,000 required by children. No deductible, based on eligibility and portability requirements.

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