

# Special education

2017

*This report is an excerpt from People for Education's Annual report on Ontario's publicly funded schools 2017.*

Special education can take many forms. While students who have been formally identified with behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities have a legal right to special education support,<sup>1</sup> students who do not have a formally identified exceptionality may also receive help through special education programs and services. These supports can involve anything from extra time for writing tests, to special equipment to help students with their schoolwork.

Over the past 10 years, there has been an increase in the average percentage of students per school receiving special education services (see Figure 1).

## Changes to the funding formula

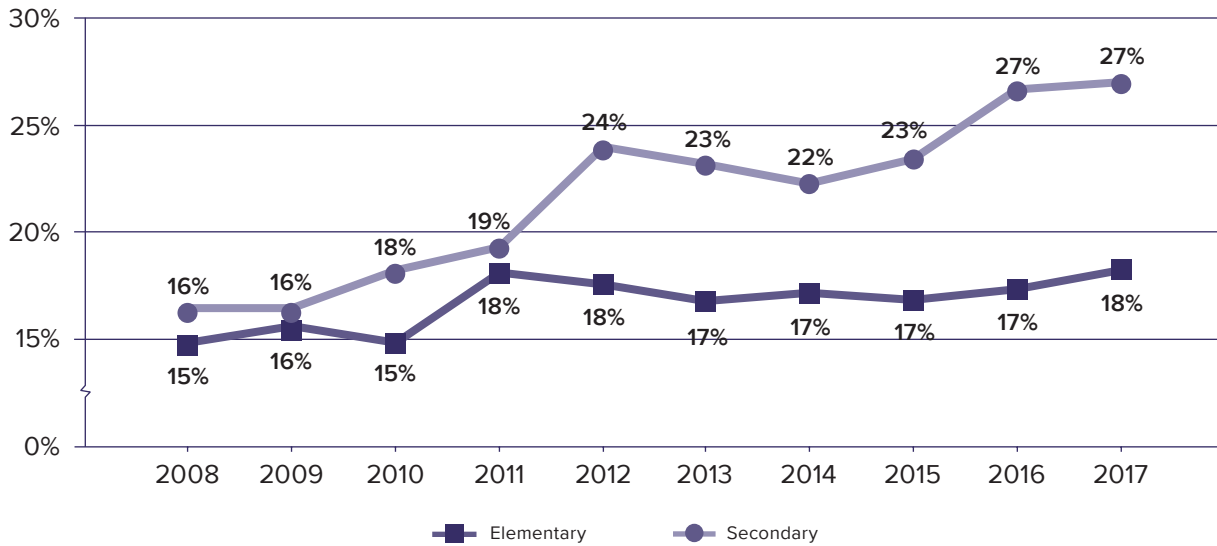
The province allocated \$2.76 billion in funding for special education in the 2016/17 school year.<sup>2</sup> Half of this funding is provided through a Special Education Per pupil Amount (SEPPA), which is based on the total number of students in the school board.<sup>3</sup> The SEPPA funds the additional assistance that the majority of special education students require—including EAs, psychologists, special education teachers, and a range of classroom supports. The remainder of special education funding is to cover the cost of supports for students with higher needs, including special equipment and facilities, separate classrooms, and special education teachers.<sup>4</sup>

### In 2017:

- An average of 18% of students in each elementary school, and 27% of students in each secondary school, receive assistance from the special education department.
- 64% of elementary and 55% of secondary schools report that there are restrictions on the number of students who can be assessed each year.
- 90% of elementary schools in the GTA have a full-time special education teacher, compared to 60% in northern Ontario.

Figure 1

## The average percentage of students per school receiving special education support



In March 2014, the Ministry of Education announced major changes to special education funding, to be rolled out over four years.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the Ministry has maintained the overall level of funding for special education, but has changed how funding is distributed among boards. The goal was to make the funding more responsive to boards' and students' needs. These changes have resulted in some boards getting more funding, while others receive less. Comments from schools indicate that the impact of these changes is being felt on the ground.

### Waiting for support

In 2017, an average of 9 students per elementary and 7 students per secondary school were waiting for professional assessment, IPRC, or placement.

Each school board is responsible for developing identification procedures and intervention strategies for its special education programs.<sup>6</sup> The following procedures *only* apply to students who are formally identified with exceptionalities.<sup>7</sup> They do not apply to the many students who are receiving special education services without a formal identification.

“We have children in crisis... wait lists are long, we do not have the services the children require to be successful at school. It is heartbreaking. Cutting an additional million from our school board will have a catastrophic effect on the children. The Ministry needs to re-evaluate this current funding model.”

Elementary school,  
Limestone DSB

“Our in-school review committee works collaboratively to prioritize needs and to determine the most effective courses of action to support students. This is a highly collaborative team that is able to provide amazing advice to help support our students’ needs.”

Elementary school, Peel DSB

There are three steps in the formal identification process:

1. Professional assessment by a psychologist, speech-language pathologist, physiotherapist, etc.
2. Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meeting and decision regarding the appropriate identification, and a recommendation regarding placement, program or support.
3. Placement in program or provision of appropriate support.

Extrapolating this year’s survey results province-wide, there are an estimated 37,000 students in Ontario waiting for professional assessment, IPRC, or placement.<sup>8</sup>

### Restrictions on assessments

Based on available resources, some boards limit the number of students that principals can put forward for assessment each year.

In 2017:

- 64% of elementary and 55% of secondary schools report restrictions on the number of students who can be assessed each year, an increase from 50% and 47%, respectively, in 2012.<sup>9</sup>
- The percentage of elementary schools reporting limits on the number of students who can be assessed ranges from 83% in eastern Ontario to 49% in the GTA (see Figure 2).
- 24% of elementary and 15% of secondary schools report that not all identified students are receiving recommended support.

Figure 2

### Percentage of elementary schools reporting limits on the number of students who can be assessed each year, by region

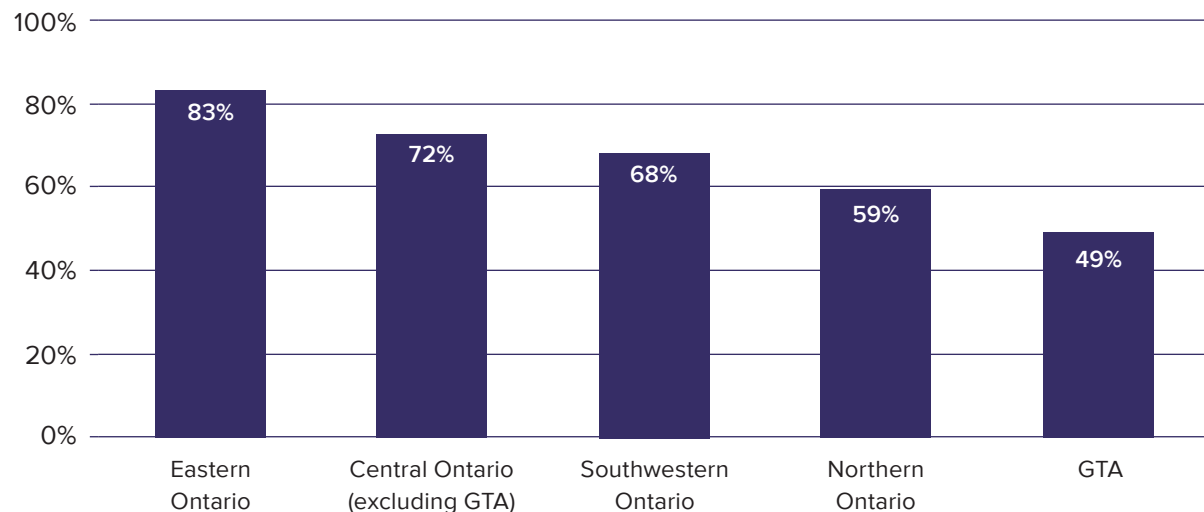
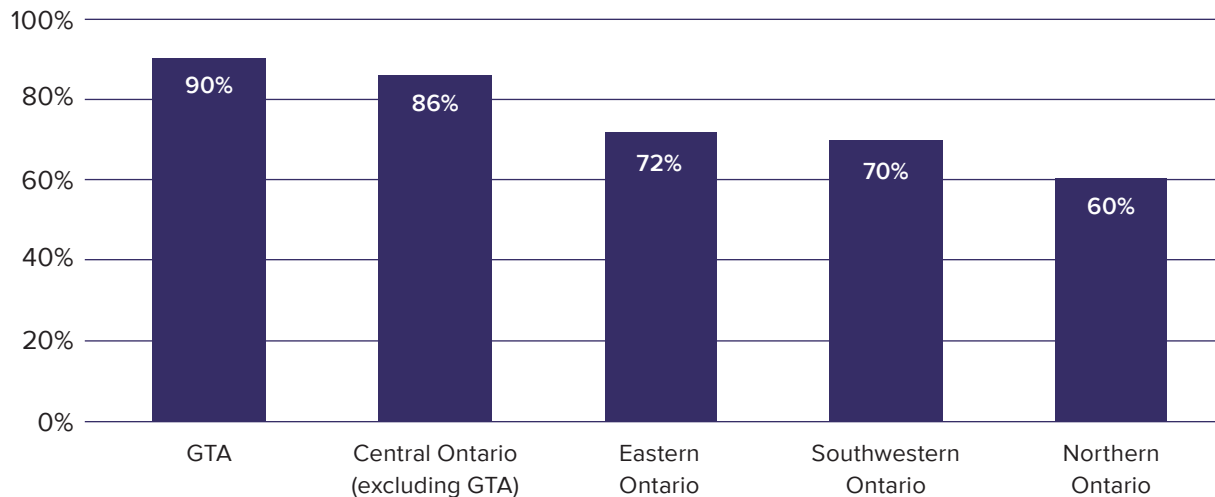


Figure 3

## Percentage of elementary schools with a full-time special education teacher, by region



### Regional differences in special education support

The survey results show substantial regional discrepancies across Ontario in terms of access to special education resources. In 2017, 90% of elementary schools in the Greater Toronto Area and 86% in central Ontario report a full-time special education teacher, compared to only 60% in northern Ontario (see Figure 3).

### Educational assistants

Eighty-eight percent of Ontario's elementary schools have at least one full-time educational assistant (EA) supporting special education. Educational assistants support students in both regular and special education classrooms, and are involved in everything from helping with lessons to assisting with personal hygiene, to behaviour management.

Under Ontario's funding formula, EAs in elementary schools are funded at a rate of one for every 5000 students, but supplemental funding through special purpose grants can improve that ratio significantly.<sup>10</sup> In this year's survey, elementary schools reported an average of one EA for every 22 students.

While there is a substantial discrepancy in the percentage of schools with special education teachers between GTA and northern Ontario elementary schools (see Figure 10), this trend does not hold for EAs. Eighty-five percent of elementary schools in northern Ontario have EAs, which is similar to the eighty-three percent in the GTA.

“Psychological assessment services are rationed essentially to the most needy one or two students a year. System level placements for our most needy students are rationed to an extent we are creating more problems during the wait time. There is a growing parent, staff and student belief that our schools are not the positive and safe places they once were.”

Elementary school,  
Hamilton-Wentworth DSB

## Notes

1. "Interpretation and Other General Matters," *Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2* (Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1990).
2. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2016-17*, 15.
3. *Ibid.*, 34.
4. *Ibid.*, 34-8.
5. Ontario Ministry of Education, *2016-17 Education Funding: A Guide to the Special Education Grant* (Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2016), 7.
6. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans*. (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2000), 6-7.
7. Ontario Ministry of Education, *2016-17 Education Funding: A Guide to the Special Education Grant*, 3.
8. This number was calculated using the mean number of students waiting for assessment, IPRC, or placement per elementary school and the total number of elementary schools in Ontario according to the October 2016 submission of the Ontario School Information System.
9. People for Education has collected data about restrictions of the number of students that can be assessed each year since 2012.
10. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2016-17*, 20-3.