

The Learning Opportunities Grant

2017

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

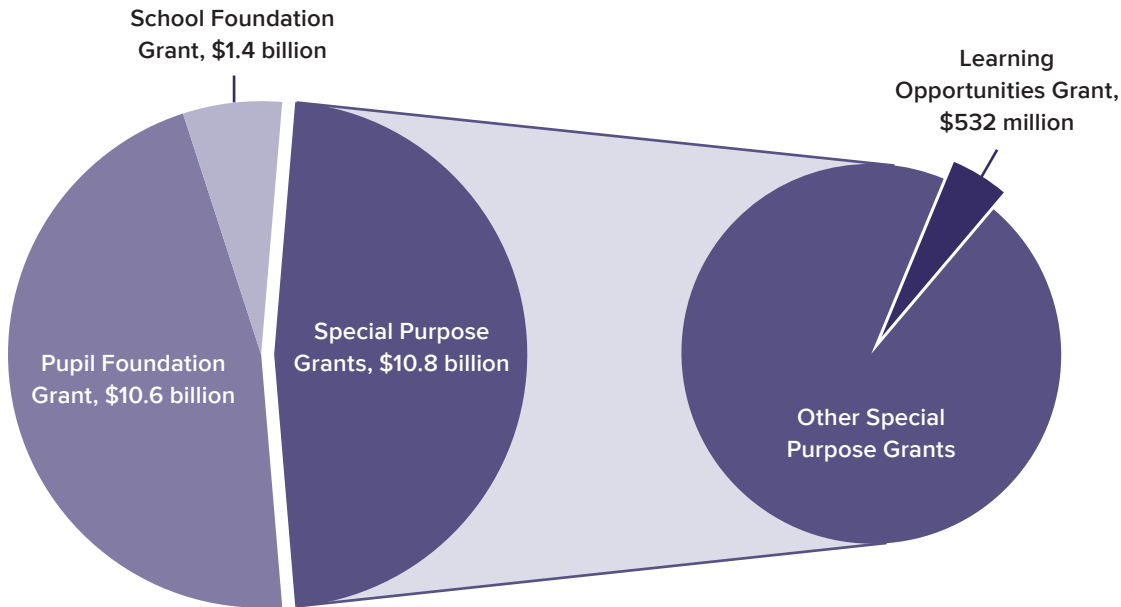
Ontario spends approximately \$24 billion annually on public education. Almost half of this funding is allocated on a per pupil basis in the Pupil Foundation Grant, which was \$10.55 billion for 2016/17 (see Figure 1). The remainder is allocated mainly through a series of Special Purpose Grants, which use socio-demographic and geographic data to assess and address any funding disparities between boards. These Special Purpose Grants are meant to help level the playing field, so that school boards that differ in size, socio-demographic make-up, geography, and access to resources are all able to support their students.

In 2016/17, the Ministry of Education provided \$10.78 billion through thirteen Special Purpose Grants—roughly 47% of the total provincial educational funding.² In this chapter, we examine one of those grants—the Learning Opportunities Grant.

“Early intervention and focused program support for children and youth at risk are solid social and economic investments in this province's future.”
Report of the expert panel on learning opportunities¹

Figure 1

Funding for schools in Ontario



In 1997, when the provincial education funding formula was first developed, the province included a Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) to provide greater financial assistance to boards with higher proportions of students deemed ‘at-risk’ of academic failure or disengagement.

The funding was intended to support things like early intervention programs, guidance programs, withdrawal for individualized support, parental and community engagement, and opportunities for multi-sector collaboration and partnerships³—all of which were perceived as ways to provide students with an equitable chance for success in education.

The original description of the grant pointed to a number of factors that could determine students’ vulnerability, including, “low family income; an ongoing struggle to meet basic needs for food, shelter and clothing; poor quality nutrition; low parental education levels; single parentage; chronically stressed parents; lack of social support networks; family violence and substance abuse; dilapidated and overcrowded housing; limited recreational and sports opportunities; fear of violence at school or in the community; proximity to sub-cultures of crime; traumatized refugee backgrounds; a poor outlook for jobs and the future.”⁴

The LOG not only provided a way to support early intervention and create targeted programming for children and youth deemed at-risk, but it also positioned redistributive equity as an important educational, social, and economic investment.⁵

Funding local solutions

To ensure that the LOG was effective, the Ministry of Education appointed an expert panel in 1997 to provide advice on funding and programs to support students who may be at risk of struggling in school.

The panel advised the Ministry to provide funding for a “diversity of local solutions.”⁶ These solutions could include things like “lower pupil/teacher ratios, teacher aides, tutors, counsellors, social workers assessment, augmented literacy and numeracy programming, expanded kindergarten, intensified remedial reading programs, adapted curriculum, computer-aided instruction, summer school, before- and after-school programs, homework help, recreation and sports activities, orientation and life skills, mentoring, private sector partnerships, breakfast/lunch programs, excursions, field trips, arts and cultural programs, extra-curricular activities, parenting classes, home/school linkages, and stay-in-school and school re-entry programs.”⁷

The expert panel recommended four demographic variables to be used in determining eligibility for funds: “poverty, parental education, refugee status, and aboriginal status.”⁸ They also recommended that the LOG be set at \$400 million, and used specifically on programs and services for students deemed to be at-risk.⁹

When the LOG was first implemented in 1998, the grant was distributed based on demographics, as recommended by the expert panel. However, the amount of funding was set at \$185 million, instead of the approximately \$400 million recommended by the panel.¹⁰

Funding remains below 1997 recommendations

Since 1998, the demographic allocation in the LOG has increased fairly steadily. However, it is still substantially below the \$400 million recommended in 1997. If kept at the rate of inflation, according to the Bank of Canada inflation calculator,¹¹ the demographic allocation for the LOG should have been approximately \$564.2 million for the 2016/17 funding year, but it was only \$353 million.¹²

Proportional decrease in demographic allocation

Not only is the demographic portion of the LOG well below the funding level recommended in 1997, but it has also steadily decreased in proportion to the total LOG funding.

In 2000/01, the Ministry of Education began adding new programs to the LOG, targeted more closely to literacy and numeracy. These programs are for all of Ontario’s 2 million students, not only those whose socio-economic status may put them at risk. As the funding for these new programs was added, the proportion of funding based on boards’ demographics was reduced.¹³

New programs and initiatives added to the LOG include:

- Literacy and Math Outside the School Day
- Student Success, Grades 7 to 12
- School Effectiveness Framework
- Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) Tutoring
- Specialist High Skills Major
- Mental Health Leaders
- Outdoor Education
- Library Staff
- School Authorities Amalgamation

The allocations focused on literacy and numeracy have not only increased in proportion to the overall LOG funding, but they also appear to be deviating from the original intent of the grant (redistributive equity) by focusing more on performance-driven initiatives. By continuing to reduce the demographic portion of the LOG, it is more difficult for school boards to provide resources such as before- and after-school care, summer school, extra-curricular activities, art and cultural events.

Table 1 includes all the changes to the LOG funding over the past decade. In 2006/07, 82% of the LOG funds were reserved for the Demographic Allocation.¹⁴ However, by 2010/11, the Demographic Allocation had dropped to 74% of total LOG funding,¹⁵ and is now projected to include only 47% of total LOG funding for 2017/18 (see Figure 2).¹⁶

Enveloping funding—micromanagement or protection for students at risk?

In 2014, the Ministry of Education released *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. In its consultations to develop the vision, the Ministry requested input on “earmarking or enveloping funds for specific purposes.”³² When funds are enveloped—as is the case with special education—they can only be spent for the specified purpose. Most education funding is not enveloped, and it is ultimately up to boards to choose where to spend it.

According to the Ministry, two perspectives emerged from the consultations. Their report says, “Many participants felt that enveloping encouraged silos, stifled innovation and created the risk of spending unnecessarily in one area while having to skimp on another. School boards, in particular, expressed these concerns.”³³ Conversely, others said that, “some controls of this nature were needed to ensure key principles of the education system, for example, equity and stewardship of resources, were supported.”³⁴

In its 1997 report, the expert panel had recommended protecting the funding in what was then a demographically based LOG. Instead, in 2016/17, the Ministry of Education enveloped eight components within the LOG into a “Student Achievement Envelope.”³⁵ This funding must be spent in the areas it describes. The demographic portion of the LOG has no similar requirements; it can be spent in any way a board chooses.

Table 1

Breakdown of LOG funding

| Year | Demographic Allocation (millions) ¹⁷ | % of LOG ¹⁸ | Other LOG Allocations (millions) | % of LOG | Total LOG (millions) ¹⁹ |
|-----------------------|---|------------------------|----------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| 2006/07 ²⁰ | \$321.8 | 82% | \$68.8 | 18% | \$390.6 |
| 2007/08 ²¹ | \$332.1 | 82% | \$72.4 | 18% | \$404.5 |
| 2008/09 ²² | \$340.8 | 82% | \$72.8 | 18% | \$413.6 |
| 2009/10 ²³ | \$338.6 | 82% | \$75.9 | 18% | \$414.5 |
| 2010/11 ²⁴ | \$340.1 | 74% | \$120.2 | 26% | \$460.3 |
| 2011/12 ²⁵ | \$351.2 | 74% | \$125.1 | 26% | \$476.3 |
| 2012/13 ²⁶ | \$348.7 | 71% | \$145.4 | 29% | \$494.1 |
| 2013/14 ²⁷ | \$346.4 | 71% | \$144.1 | 29% | \$490.5 |
| 2014/15 ²⁸ | \$350.4 | 69% | \$154.8 | 31% | \$505.2 |
| 2015/16 ²⁹ | \$349.9 | 69% | \$154.7 | 31% | \$504.6 |
| 2016/17 ³⁰ | \$353.0 | 66% | \$179.1 | 34% | \$532.1 |
| 2017/18 ³¹ | \$358.2 | 47% | \$401.1 | 53% | \$759.2 |

Figure 2

Demographic allocation, as a percentage of LOG



Evaluating impacts

Since 1997, a range of advisors have recommended that the province do more to evaluate the impact of the LOG grant. The initial expert panel recommended instituting processes for accountability and reporting on how funding was being used. The panel also recommended that “all programs should ultimately be evaluated in terms of the results they have achieved for students.”³⁶ This sentiment was echoed in the 2002 Education Equality Task Force report, which recommended “collecting and analyzing data on programs and services for students at risk from a representative sample of school boards... to determine the appropriate funding magnitude for the LOG.” The report suggested that greater attention be paid to the correlation between funding, student achievement and the reduction of the achievement gap.³⁷

Notes

1. Expert Panel on the Learning Opportunities Grant, *Learning Opportunities Grant: Panel Report to Minister of Education and Training* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 1997), 4.
2. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2016-17*, 16.
3. Expert Panel on the Learning Opportunities Grant, *Learning Opportunities Grant*.
4. Ibid., 4.
5. Ibid., 4.
6. Ibid., 8.
7. Ibid., 8.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Hugh MacKenzie, *Turning Point? Time to Renovate Ontario's Education Funding Formula* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006).
10. People for Education, *Public Education in Ontario's Cities* (Toronto, ON: People for Education, 2005), 15.
11. “Inflation Calculator,” *Bank of Canada*, accessed March 30, 2017.
12. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2016-17*, 62.
13. Norbert Hartmann, *Overview of Student-Focused Funding in 2000-01* (Memorandum to Directors of Education, March 9, 2000); Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2005-06* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2005), 55.
14. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2006-07* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2006), 49.
15. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2010-11* (Toronto: ON, Government of Ontario, 2010), 61.
16. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2017-18*, 63.
17. Demographic Allocation values were drawn from each individual education funding technical report released by the Ministry of Education of Ontario and are projected values as per the reporting year. Figures are rounded.
18. All percentages are calculated from identified values.

19. Total LOG amounts were drawn from individual annual education funding technical report released by the Ministry of Education of Ontario and are projections. Actual total amounts will slightly differ from those reported here. However, to conduct the analysis on the projected demographic allocations, overall projected LOG values were employed. Figures are rounded.
20. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2006-07*.
21. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2007-08* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2007).
22. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2008-09* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2008).
23. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2009-10* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2009).
24. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2010-11*.
25. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2011-12* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2011).
26. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2012-13* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2012).
27. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2013-14*, (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2013).
28. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2014-15*, (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2014).
29. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2015-16*, (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2015).
30. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2016-17*.
31. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2017-18*.
32. Ontario Ministry of Education, *2015-16 Education Funding: Consultation Summary* (Toronto, ON: Government of Ontario, 2015), 16.
33. Ibid., 16.
34. Ibid., 16.
35. The six enveloped components are the Literacy and Math Outside the School Day Allocation, the Students Success, Grades 7 to 12 Allocation, the Grade 7 and 8 Literacy and Numeracy and Student Success Teachers Allocation, the School Effectiveness Framework Allocation, the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) Tutoring Allocation, the Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) Allocation, the Outdoor Education Allocation, and the Library Staff Allocation. For more information, please see Ontario Ministry of Education, *Education Funding: Technical Paper, 2016-17*.
36. Expert Panel on the Learning Opportunities Grant, *Learning Opportunities Grant*, 12.
37. Mordechai Rozanski, *Investing in public education: Advancing the goal of continuous improvement in student learning and achievement; Report of the Education Equality Task Force* (Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2002).