

SPECIAL EDUCATION

This report is an excerpt from the 2015 Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools.

On average, 17 percent of elementary and 23 percent of secondary students per school (over 331,000 students) receive special education services and supports. This proportion has risen fairly steadily over the past 15 years.

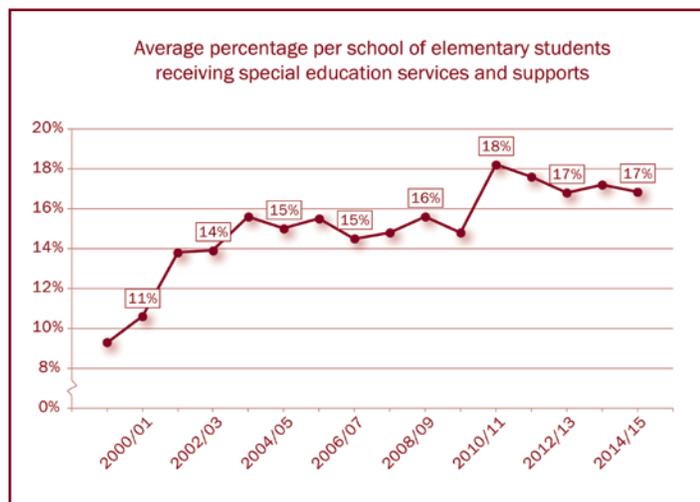
Students' special education needs vary widely, from minor accommodations, such as additional time to take tests or use of a laptop; to students who need significant help to communicate or be part of life in the school.

SUBSTANTIAL DIFFERENCES ACROSS SCHOOL BOARDS

There is little consistency across the province in how special education services are delivered. The percentage of students receiving special education supports ranges from 6 percent in some boards to 27 percent in others.¹

There are also significant differences between boards in how students access special education services. The Ministry of Education reports that, province-wide, 56 percent of students who receive special education support go through a formal Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process, usually involving a psycho-educational assessment. That formal process gives students a legal right to special education support. The remaining students receive services without a formal process, usually through consultation with an in-school team to

Figure 1



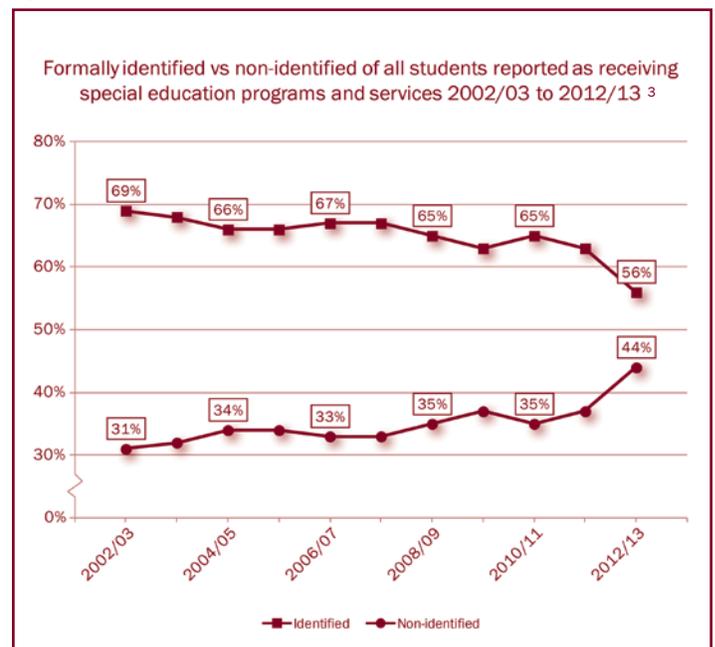
QUICK FACTS

- An average of 17% of elementary and 23% of secondary students per school receive special education support.
- 57% of elementary and 53% of secondary principals report there are restrictions on waiting lists for special education assessments.
- 22% of elementary and 19% of secondary schools report that not all identified students are receiving recommended supports.

develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Here again though, there are substantial differences between boards. In some boards, as few as 2 percent of students receiving special education supports have an IPRC, while in others, *all* students do.

Provincially, the percentage of students who get special education services less formally increased by more than one-third between 2003 and 2013.² (See Figure 2)

Figure 2



Staff are doing the best they can and are creative in their response to student needs...positive response from whole staff to assisting/problem solving for students. Staff are responsive to and inclusive of parents in process. We are seeing a larger increase in non-IPRC students with IEPs, [which leads to] concerns about generating special education staff numbers to continue to support students well.

Secondary school, Toronto DSB

“OUR MAJOR BOTTLENECK”: ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

In this year’s survey, a number of principals expressed concern about students getting timely access to special education services. There are approximately 44,000 elementary and secondary students on waiting lists for assessments, IPRC meetings, or for services.⁴

Getting students assessed is our major bottleneck to providing special education services.

Elementary school, Rainbow DSB

On average, six students per elementary school are waiting for special education assessments. This number may seem small, but there are also many students who may need support and cannot get on a waiting list. The percentage of principals who report restrictions on the number of students that they can place on waiting lists for assessments has jumped since we first asked the question in 2010/11—from 50 percent to 57 percent this year in elementary schools, and from 47 percent to 53 percent in secondary schools.

It is difficult and not often recommended to identify [students] until grade 3. Thus, our students in greatest need at times for intervention are not yet identified/accessing services. Additionally, with only a few identifications per year, per school allotted, many students do not get identified until much later—contrary to best practice per research/early identification and intervention. We work hard to identify needs early on, and access community agency support, but more funding at this level would be helpful.

Elementary school, Northeastern CDSB

“NOT ENOUGH SUPPORT”

A number of principals report that students in their school are well-supported through “fantastic” special education departments and the support of the whole staff. Far more frequently, however, principals report there are shortcomings in available supports that they are concerned will have an impact on learning and safety at their schools.

Special education is completely underfunded and the criterion-based process for students to receive support is not inclusive and completely flawed. We need greater support staff in the way of academic support but also itinerant support for special needs kids without diagnosis, or awaiting medical diagnosis.

Elementary school, Peel DSB

Students who have gone through an IPRC have a right to special education services, but the school is not required to implement all of the recommendations. Currently, 22 percent of elementary schools and 19 percent of secondary schools report that at least some of their identified students are not receiving recommended supports.

STAFF SUPPORT

The ratio of special education students to special education teachers has increased steadily over the past decade.

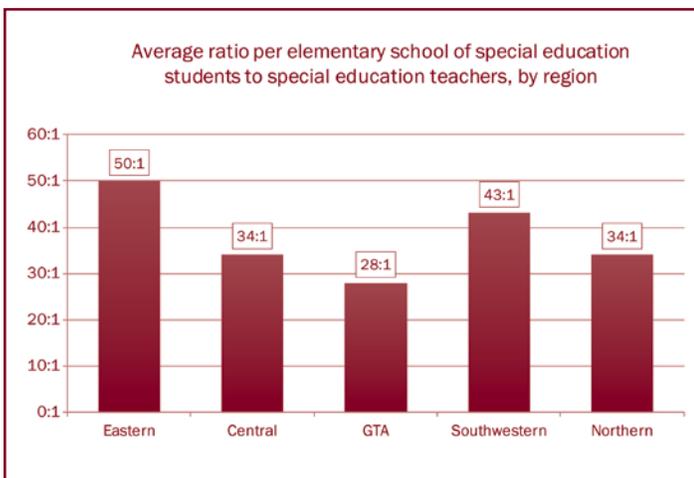
In 2014/15, in schools reporting a special education teacher:

- the average ratio per elementary school is 37 special education students per special education teacher, compared to 34 students per teacher in 2003/04.
- the average ratio per secondary school is 79 special education students per special education teacher, compared to 58 per teacher in 2003/04.

These ratios may also depend on where a student lives. On average, an elementary special education teacher in eastern Ontario works with nearly twice as many students per school as a special education teacher in the GTA: 50 vs. 28 students.

Educational assistants (EAs) can be a critical part of the special education team, providing important support to teachers and students. They often work closely with students who have the most intense special education needs. The majority of elementary schools (83 percent) have at least one full-time equivalent EA. Per school, the average number of students with special education needs for each EA is 21 in elementary schools and 57 in secondary.

Figure 3



The teaching assistant situation is at a critical and unsafe level. We absolutely do not have enough teaching assistants to serve our high needs students. Student safety is at risk. Mental health is becoming an increasing issue and there are very few available supports.

Elementary school, Peel DSB

INCLUSION

According to provincial figures, 83 percent of students with special education needs are fully integrated into regular classrooms for at least half the day,⁵ a proportion that has increased slightly in the last decade, from 81 percent.⁶ In some boards, all students are included in regular classrooms, while in others, 4 percent (excluding gifted) may be in congregated settings.⁷

Because of the wide range in students' needs, it is important that classroom teachers are skilled in using a variety of strategies to reach different learners, and that they have a team available to provide appropriate supports.⁸

Our inclusive model is one that more reflects society on the whole. I feel it is the only way to implement special education that helps prepare both students and their classmates for positive interaction and mutual support.

Elementary school, Simcoe Muskoka CDSB

Le ministère prône l'inclusion de tous mais ne fournit pas d'appui pour ces élèves. Il faut embaucher plus d'aide enseignantes et plus d'éducatrice pour venir appuyer les élèves en difficultés au sein des classes régulières. L'enseignant titulaire ne peut différencier au niveau que le ministère l'exige surtout avec un curriculum chargé et les classes ayant plus de 20 élèves.

Elementary school, CSDC de l'Est ontarien⁹

CHANGES IN THE FUNDING FORMULA

The majority of special education funding is provided on a straight per-pupil basis, and is intended to fund special education supports for students with relatively basic special education needs. But more than a third is earmarked to provide services and/or support for the relatively small number of students whose special education needs are higher.

In 2014/15, the Ministry of Education maintained the overall level of funding for special education, but there have been major changes in how funding is distributed among boards. The changes have resulted in increased amounts for boards that were previously receiving relatively low funding for students with higher special education needs, and cuts to boards that had been funded at a higher level. The funding adjustments are being implemented over four years, but they are already adding stress to many boards' budgets, since the vast majority of boards report that they spend significantly more on special education than they receive from the Ministry.¹⁰

The new funding model for students with higher special education needs is calculated based on two factors:

- a Special Education Statistical Prediction Model that uses demographic data to estimate the total number of students likely to receive special education supports; and
- a formula for 'Measures of Variability' which takes into account other particular local factors, such as percentage of students exempted from EQAO tests, remoteness, percentage of students currently receiving special education supports, estimated percentage of students who are First Nations, Métis or Inuit, and numbers of locally developed courses or alternative credits offered by the Board.

Unfortunately, most of the demographic statistics being used are now almost ten years out of date.¹¹ This is worrying, because significant demographic changes *should* affect how the high needs special education funding is allocated.

NEXT STEPS

Special education support continues to be the most common concern raised by the principals who fill in our survey, the most common topic for parents who call the People for Education phone line, and one of the most common funding stresses raised by school boards.

Despite substantial increases in funding and changes to the funding formula, there continue to be major problems to be solved in special education.

Parents need special education ombudsman offices at the local level to help solve problems, and students with special education needs require stronger special education policy and easier access to resources to ensure their chances for success.

NOTES

- 1 Finlay, B. Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2015). Overview of students receiving special education supports and services 2012-2013. Personal communication, March 30, 2015.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2014). *An overview of Special Education* [PowerPoint slides].
- 4 Extrapolation: average of 9 students per elementary and secondary school on lists, multiplied by 924 secondary schools and 3978 elementary schools.
- 5 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2014) *An Overview of Special Education*. Ministry of Education, Ontario. October 2014. Link: <http://www.ldaio.ca/wp-content/uploads/Special-Education-Overview-Oct-2014.pdf>. Accessed May 22, 2015.
- 6 Bennett, S., & Wynne, K. (2006). *Special education transformation: The report of the co- chairs with the recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education* (pp. 43). Toronto: Government of Ontario.
Ontario Ministry of Education. (2005). *Education for all: Report on the expert panel on literacy and numeracy instruction for students with special education needs*. Toronto, ON.
- 7 Brown, R. S., Newton, L., Parekh, G., and Zaretsky, H. (2013) *Special education in the TDSB and Ontario: An overview, 2011- 13*. Toronto: TDSB.
- 8 Parekh, G. (2014). *A case for inclusive education: A TDSB Report*. Toronto: TDSB.
- 9 English translation: [The Ministry promotes inclusion of all students but doesn't provide support for these students. We need to hire more educational assistants and also a specialist teacher to come help the students (in difficulty/with special education needs) in the context of regular classrooms. The classroom teacher can't differentiate at the level the Ministry demands all with a very full (loaded, pressured) curriculum and classes with more than twenty students.]
- 10 Gallagher-Mackay, K., and Kidder, A. (2014) *Special Education*. Toronto, ON. People for Education. Link: <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/special-education-2014-WEB.pdf>. Accessed April 13, 2015.
- 11 While there are major concerns about the National Household Survey Data, there are also major concerns in *not* using it as there have been significant demographic changes in some parts of Ontario over that decade. For example, the City of Brampton reports that its population has increased by more than a fifth, in that time, and that the percentage of the population who are immigrants has also increased, from 48% to 51% in that time City of Brampton. (n.d.) Brampton, Ontario, Canada: Demographic Overview. Link: <https://www.brampton.ca/en/Business/edo/business-knowledge/Economic-Reports-Papers-Statistics/Documents/City%20Profile/Population.pdf>. Accessed April 2, 2015.



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