

# SPECIAL EDUCATION

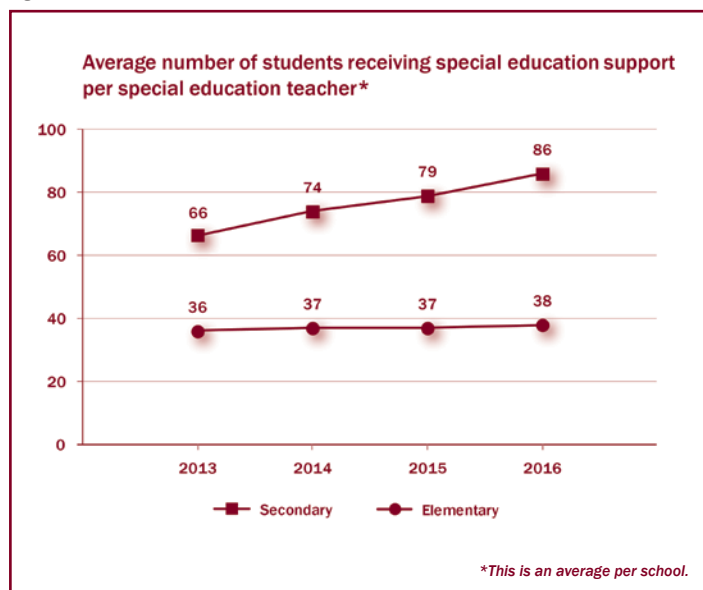
This report is an excerpt from the 2016 Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools.

All students, regardless of ability or specialized instructional needs, have equal rights to public education in Ontario. This principle is embedded in our current education system, and, for students identified with special education needs, enshrined in law.<sup>1</sup> Virtually every school in Ontario has students who receive special education assistance.<sup>2</sup>

## ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

In 2016, an average of 17% of students in each elementary school and 27% of students in each secondary school receive any assistance from the special education department. Supports for students cover a wide range—from specialized classes and equipment for students with very high needs, to a little extra help during the day in a regular classroom. Not all students with special education needs require or receive support from qualified special education teachers. In cases where students are receiving support in a regular classroom, for example, the classroom teacher may be supported by a special education teacher who works with all of the teachers in the school. In other cases—where students may have higher, or particular needs—the students may be withdrawn for all or part of the day to a special education class. While the ratio of

Figure 1



## QUICK FACTS

- An average of 17% of students in each elementary school, and 27% of students in each secondary school receive any assistance from the special education department.
- 59% of elementary and 52% of secondary schools report that there are restrictions on the number of students they can place on waiting lists for assessments.
- 91% of urban/suburban elementary schools report having a full-time special education teacher, compared to only 66% of small town/rural schools.

students receiving special education support to special education teachers has remained fairly steady in elementary schools over the last four years, there has been a substantial increase in the ratio in secondary schools (see Figure 1).

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Lots of successes due to our GREAT team of teachers, [resource teachers] and [educational assistants]. We work together with parents and students to serve needs. We make excellent use of the support we receive and we know how very valuable it is!

*Elementary school, Huron Perth CDSB*

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## PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS—WAITING LISTS AND RESTRICTIONS

While 44% of students receiving special education support have Individual Education Plans only (and no formal identification), 56% go through an Identification Placement and Review (IPRC) process.<sup>3</sup> This process is required in order to be identified under one of the province's categories of exceptionality.<sup>4</sup> Once a student is identified, the IPRC makes a recommendation on the type of supports and/or placements to be provided.

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**[Services are] hard to access since we are 2.5 hours away from our Board Office and support staff.**

*Elementary school, Rainbow DSB*

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Prior to the IPRC process, the student may be required to undergo a psycho-educational assessment conducted by a psychologist or other trained professional. The assessment provides more information about the nature of the student's learning challenges and the types of support that may help. If the school cannot provide an assessment in a timely manner, parents may choose to pay for one privately. Private assessments can cost more than \$2,500.<sup>5</sup> When parents pay privately, they avoid waiting lists, which can range from months to years. Children on waiting lists may be going without the early support that can have an impact on their chances for long-term success.<sup>6</sup>

In 2016:

- The percentage of elementary schools reporting that not all students are receiving recommended support has increased to 26% from 22% last year.
- Elementary and secondary schools have an average of 6 students per school waiting for an assessment.
- 59% of elementary and 52% of secondary schools report that there are restrictions on the number of students they can place on waiting lists for assessments.
- Restrictions on assessments are highest in elementary schools in small town/rural areas, where 72% of schools report them, as compared with 50% in urban/suburban areas.

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**Nous avons plusieurs élèves avec des défis au niveau du comportement. Toutes notre énergie est souvent mise là. Ça va de même pour les évaluations psycho éducationnelles. On pourrait passer une dizaines d'élèves en évaluation et je crois que nous aurions des diagnostiques au niveau d'apprentissage ou de comportement qui mèneraient à des placement.**

*Elementary school, CSDC Centre-Sud<sup>7</sup>*

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## EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

Ninety-five percent of secondary and 91 percent of elementary schools have educational assistants in special education. These assistants provide support in both regular classrooms and special education classes. They work with students individually or in groups, under the guidance of the teacher. Their responsibilities include everything from helping students with lessons to assisting with personal hygiene or behavioural modification.

The qualifications required for educational assistants vary from board to board, however only 36% of elementary and 59% of secondary schools report that the majority of their educational assistants have an additional post-secondary qualification in special education.

## CHALLENGES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

In their comments, principals identify many challenges in meeting students' needs, including a lack of staff or funding; the amount of paperwork associated with special education; problems with accessing assessments due to backlogs, restrictions, or long wait times; and behaviour and mental health concerns that take substantial time away from providing academic support. In recent consultations on education funding conducted by the Ministry of Education, school boards and a range of stakeholders, including principals, teachers, parents, and board staff, raised similar concerns.<sup>8</sup>

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**[The challenge is that] teachers are unable to consistently meet the needs of all of their students (due to lack of experience, training and knowledge, and the sheer diversity of student needs) and special education teachers are restricted in the amount of support that they can provide due to time constraints (only 1 teacher and 1 EA).**

*Elementary school, Bluewater DSB*

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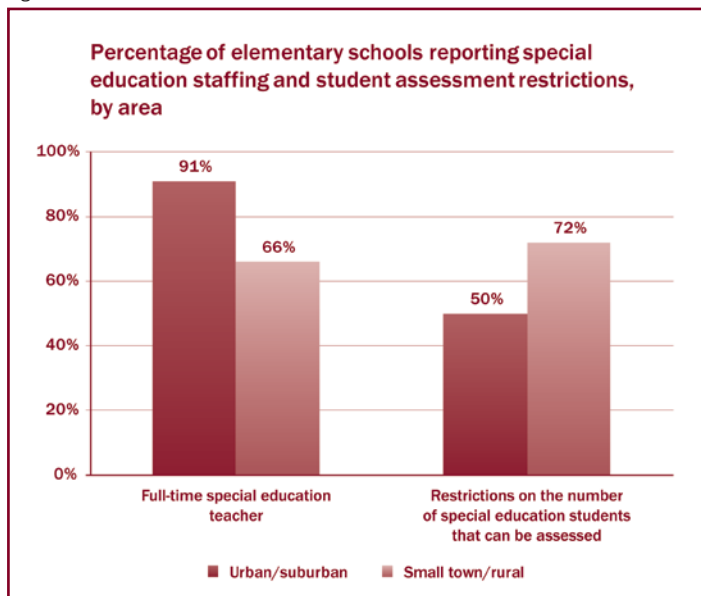
## CHANGES TO ONTARIO'S SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING FORMULA

The province estimates it will spend \$2.76 billion on special education next year. Half of this is provided through a Special Education Per-Pupil Amount (SEPPA) that is based on the total number of students in the school board.<sup>9</sup> The SEPPA funds the additional assistance that the majority of special education students require—including everything from educational assistants to psycho-educational consultants, special education teachers and a range of classroom supports.

The remainder of special education funding is intended to cover the cost of things like special equipment and facilities, separate classrooms, special education teachers, and other supports for students with higher needs.<sup>10</sup> In an effort to make the funding more responsive to boards' and students' needs, the Ministry has been implementing a new funding model focused on students with higher needs. The new funding model is calculated, for the most part, 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 local factors, such as percentage of students exempted from EQAO tests, remoteness, percentage of

Figure 2



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.

## TEACHER EDUCATION TO SUPPORT ALL STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Comments from the survey identify the need for better educational supports so that teachers can meet the broad diversity of learning needs in today's classrooms. One principal suggests, "all teachers should have [a special education] background."<sup>11</sup> A report on special education prepared for Ontario's Ministry of Education states that as more students with special education needs are accommodated within regular classrooms, providing all teachers with special education training is essential for inclusive education to be effective.<sup>12</sup>

## URBAN/SUBURBAN VS. SMALL TOWN/RURAL

Special Education support is not evenly divided throughout school boards in Ontario.

In 2016:

- 91% of urban/suburban elementary schools report having a full-time special education teacher, compared to only 66% in small town/rural schools.
- 50% of urban/suburban elementary schools report a restriction on the number of students who can receive special education assessments. That number jumps to 72% in small town/rural schools.

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[We] need MORE psycho-educational assessments. In more affluent schools, where parents are working and have coverage, they make up for the lack of assessments by having parents pay privately, which frees up assessments for the children who are left. When you work in a less affluent school there are often more students who need the assessment, fewer parents who can afford to go privately, and there are not nearly enough assessments to go around.

*Elementary school, Upper Grand DSB*

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# NOTES

- 1 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2012). *The Education Act*. Ontario: Queen's Printer. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/edact.html>.
- 2 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2016). *Introduction to Special Education in Ontario*. Ontario: Queen's Printer. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/ontario.html>.
- 3 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2014). *An Overview of Special Education*. [PowerPoint slides].
- 4 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2007). *The Identification, Placement, and Review Committee*. Ontario: Queen's Printer. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/identifi.html>.
- 5 People for Education. (2012). *Annual Report on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/annual-Report-2012-web.pdf>.
- 6 People for Education. (2012). *Special Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/special-education-early-release-2012.pdf>.
- 7 English Translation: [We have several students with behavioral problems. All of our energy is often focused on them. This is the same for psycho-educational evaluations. We could run ten more students through evaluations and I believe that we would still have the diagnostic tools in learning and behaviour that would lead to placements].
- 8 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2016). *2016-17 Education Funding: Discussion Summary*. Ontario: Queen's Printer. Retrieved from [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1617/2016\\_ds\\_en.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1617/2016_ds_en.pdf).
- 9 Ministry of Education, Ontario. (2016). *Education Funding: Technical Paper 2016-17*. Ontario: Queen's Printer. Retrieved from [http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1617/2016\\_technical\\_paper\\_en.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1617/2016_technical_paper_en.pdf).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Elementary School, Toronto DSB.
- 12 Bennett, S., & Dworet, D., with Weber K. (2013). *Special Education in Ontario Schools* (7th ed.). Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON: Highland Press; Specht, J., McGhie-Richmond, D., Loreman, T., Mirenda, P., Bennett, S., Gallagher, T., & Cloutier, S. (2016). Teaching in inclusive classrooms: Efficacy and beliefs of Canadian preservice teachers. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(1), 1-15.



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

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