

Special education

Almost all schools in Ontario have some students receiving special education support. In elementary schools, an average of 17% of students per school are getting special education support. In secondary schools the average is 27% (see Figure 3.1). The kind of support students receive depends on both their individual needs and the resources available.

Students getting support without formal identification

Special education covers a wide range of supports and interventions—from a little extra help in a regular class to the provision of specialized medical equipment and one, or even two, dedicated staff. Students with higher needs usually go through a formal identification process; others may have no specific special education “label”, but are supported through Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Approximately half of students receiving special education support have an IEP without a formal identification (Ontario, 2017d). These students may have a learning disability, or may simply need a little extra help. The support they get can include things like extra time for writing tests, occasional help from an educational assistant, adjustments to the way they are marked, or other strategies or accommodations agreed to by the teacher, parents, and student.

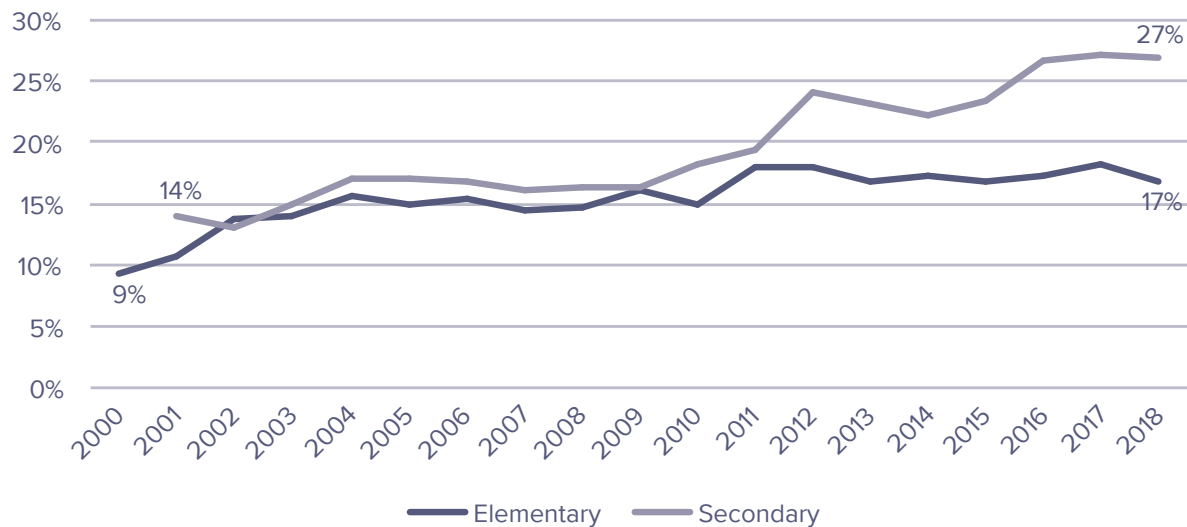
Students who have been formally identified through an Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) have special education needs that fit into at least one of five provincially-recognized categories: behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities. These students have a legal right to special education support (Education Act, RSO, 1990), which can include specialized equipment, withdrawal for all or part of the day to a class with a special education teacher, support from an educational assistant, modifications to the curriculum, and/or specialized classes (Ontario, 2017c).

In 2018:

- An average of 17% of students per elementary school and 27% per secondary school receives special education support.
- 66% of elementary schools and 53% of secondary schools report a restriction on the number of students that can be assessed for special education each year – a trend that has been increasing among elementary school over the years.
- 92% of urban elementary schools have a full-time special education teacher, compared to 72% of rural elementary schools.
- 58% of elementary principals and 48% of secondary principals report that they have had to recommend a student with special education needs not attend school for the full day – the majority for safety reasons.
- 93% of elementary schools and 97% of secondary schools report that students waiting for an assessment are receiving some special education support.

Figure 3.1

Average proportion of students receiving special education support per school



“Special Education needs continue to rise, as support continues to be cut. Many students with Autism Spectrum Disorder who require full time support do not receive it; thus making it a safety concern for all involved. More money needs to be put into special education in order to provide these students with the care and education they should receive; just like all other students.”

Elementary school,
York Catholic DSB

“We don’t have enough special education support to provide services to students who are not identified but who still have significant challenges.”

Elementary school,
Rainbow DSB

Staff support

Students with special education needs receive support from staff in a range of ways, including:

- Occasional support from an educational assistant in a regular classroom
- Support from the classroom teacher, who is in turn supported by a specialist special education teacher who works with all of the teachers in the school
- Support from a specialist special education teacher, either in their regular classroom or withdrawn for part of the day
- Placement in a separate class with a specialist special education teacher, with or without some time spent in a regular class

Nearly all schools have at least a part-time special education teacher. However, only 72% of rural elementary schools report a full-time special education teacher, compared to 92% of urban schools. This has been consistent over the past several years.

The average ratio of students receiving special education support to special education teachers is 36:1 in elementary school and 74:1 in secondary school.

Eighty-eight percent of elementary and 94% of secondary schools have educational assistants (EAs) who provide vital support, both to classroom teachers and to students. Educational assistants help students with ongoing lessons, assist with personal hygiene, and support students in managing their behavior. The average ratio of students receiving special education support to educational assistants is 19:1 in elementary schools and 61:1 in secondary schools.

Parents are being asked to keep some students home

While most schools have educational assistants, principals continue to report that they have insufficient support for their students with special education needs. One consequence may be that there are times when principals ask parents to keep students home. Since 2014, there has been an increase in the percentage of schools that report having asked that a student be kept home for all or part of the school day. It is unclear what is causing this change—an increase in the frequency/severity of behaviour problems, a decrease in available resources, or some combination of these.

In 2018:

- 58% of elementary and 48% of secondary school principals report they have had to recommend a student with special education needs not attend school for the full day. This is a substantial increase from 48% and 40% respectively, in 2014.
- 73% of elementary principals who answered “yes” to this question, said it was for safety reasons, while 18% said it was because supports were not available.

Waitlists and restrictions

In order to be formally identified with a recognized special education exceptionality under Ministry of Education guidelines (Ontario, 2017d), students must be assessed by a specialist such as a psychologist,⁵ speech-language pathologist, or physician. In last year’s survey, 38% of elementary and 40% of secondary schools reported having regularly scheduled access to psychologists, while 13% of elementary and 16% of secondary schools reported having no access at all (People for Education, 2017).

The lack of access to specialists can result in students having to wait for assessments. Wait times vary, based on the severity of student needs and the school board’s policy for waiting lists. This year, 93% of elementary and 79% of secondary schools report that they have students on waiting lists. It is important to note, however, that while students are waiting for assessment, they are not necessarily going without support. The vast majority of schools report that students waiting for special education assessments have Individual Education Plans (89% of elementary and 97% of secondary) and are receiving special education support (93% of elementary and 97% of secondary).

Many school boards impose restrictions on the number of students who can be assessed per year (see Figure 3.2), often because of limited access to specialists.

“Almost all of our EAs support students with safety, behavioural, and/or communication challenges. If I have asked a parent to keep a student home it is almost always related to safety (the student runs, hits self/peers/adults, or vandalizes the space he/she is in). Even with 14 EA FTEs I have new needs that enter my school regularly which means I am stretched thin.”

Elementary school,
Halton DSB

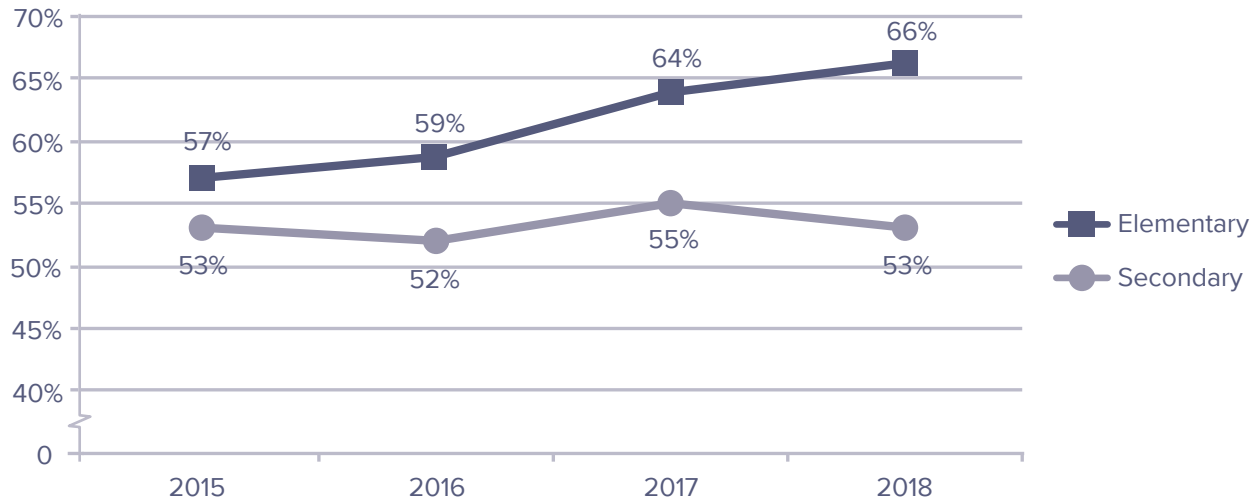
“The Psychologist and Speech Language Pathologist only come once a week, and the number of students in need of assessment is overwhelming. We are in a poor socio-economic area and parents do not have the financial resources to do private assessments. We have a number of students that are on the Autism spectrum and/or have behavioural issues, and not having full day support for these children makes it a safety issue (to themselves and others). Also, having to cluster support does not always function very well. We are finding that students are not making the gains they could because of the distraction of 1 EA having to go between 3 to 4 students with high needs.”

Elementary school,
Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB

5. In this document, the term “psychologist” includes registered psychologists and registered psychological associates, as well as supervised non-registered psychology service providers in schools.

Figure 3.2

Percentage of schools reporting a restriction on the number of students to be assessed



“Two-tier system for parents who have money to pay for assessments [outside of the school system].⁶”

Elementary school,
Conseil des écoles publiques
de l’Est de l’Ontario

“We are given 2 assessments per year and they usually come late in the school year. Given our geographic location, there are not a lot resources available to the students (and their parents) on the autism spectrum or who have difficulty with behaviour and/or mental wellness.”

Elementary school,
Algonquin and Lakeshore
Catholic DSB

In 2018:

- 66% of elementary schools and 53% of secondary schools report there is a restriction on the number of students who can be assessed.
- 73% of rural elementary schools report restrictions, compared to 61% of urban schools.

In March 2018, the Ontario Ministry of Education announced \$72 million in funding for the 2018/19 school year to reduce waiting lists for special education assessments and to “increase services through multi-disciplinary teams and other staffing resources” (Davis, 2018).

The impact of parental education and income

This year, we used information from Statistics Canada and Ontario’s Ministry of Education to examine the relationship between students’ family background and a range of resources and programs in schools. We compared the top and bottom 25% of our elementary school sample in two areas: the proportion of families under the Low-Income Measure, and the proportion of students with at least one parent who has graduated from university. For the sake of comparison, we refer to these as *high* and *low* poverty schools, and *high* and *low* parental education schools.

Many researchers suggest that students from disadvantaged

6. Translated from French. Original comment: “Système à 2 vitesses pour les parents qui ont de l’argent pour déboursier l’évaluation.”

backgrounds are more likely to be identified with certain kinds of special needs. These families have less access to services, fewer monetary resources, lower educational backgrounds, and may have less confidence to advocate for their children than more affluent families (Ong-Dean, 2009). As a result, there may be an over-representation of lower income students in special education classes (Brown & Parekh, 2013).

In 2018, students in elementary schools with lower levels of parental education, and in schools with higher poverty, were more likely to be receiving special education support:

- On average, 12% of students in elementary schools with *high parental education* receive special education support, compared to 23% of students in elementary schools with *low parental education*. This includes both students with a formal diagnosis, and those with an IEP.
- On average, 13% of students in *low poverty* elementary schools receive special education support, compared to an average of 16% in *high poverty* elementary schools.

Recommendations

Over the years, the province has increased overall funding for special education, and introduced a range of models and formulas to allocate the funding to school boards. In the last four years, some of those changes have resulted in funding increases for some boards and decreases for others. However, principals continue to point to both delivery of special education services and support for students with mental health issues as significant stresses in their schools.

People for Education recommends that the province:

- Provide adequate support to educators in kindergarten and the early grades to ensure they have the time and capacity to identify students who may need special education support.
- Ensure that students who require special education support are receiving it as early as possible. By addressing special education needs early, some students may not require support in later grades.
- Consider re-distributing some of the funding currently targeted at reducing waitlists to provide more on-the-ground support, including increased numbers of educational assistants.