



# **Closing the Gaps for Students with Special Education Needs in Ontario: Research Trends and Capacity Building**

Special Education Policy and Programs Branch  
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## **Closing the Gaps for Students with Special Education Needs in Ontario: Research Trends and Capacity Building**

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## 1. SPECIAL EDUCATION IN ONTARIO

### A. Overview

Support for students with special education needs in Ontario continues to grow and evolve; closing achievement gaps for all students continues to be a major priority. The Ministry of Education is committed to meeting the needs of a wide range of learners, and has focused, in special education, on a student achievement agenda, including:

- Improving the outcomes for students receiving special education programs and services;
- Increasing the capacity for schools to meet the needs of a variety of learners in settings ranging from regular to self-contained classrooms;
- Ensuring that programming in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) is linked to the Ontario curriculum and the Provincial Report Card;
- Improving the balance between a focus on teaching and learning, and the need for appropriate process, documentation and accountability; and
- Closing the gap.

Ontario continues to change, economically, demographically, socially and technologically, and evidence of these changes is already being seen in classrooms throughout the province.

In order to continue to prepare students, teachers, administrators and schools in general for continued change, the Ministry continues to investigate and support education research and use evidence-informed decision making in setting priorities for special education. These have included:

- *Education for All K-6*
- The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) Education for All Projects
- The Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) Project
- *Learning for All K-12*
- Collaborative Service Delivery Models for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- IEPs

These initiatives have all been based on research that indicates system capacity building, leadership and the continuous improvement of instructional and assessment tools are key to closing achievement gaps for students with special education needs.



Research on instructional and assessment techniques (differentiated instruction and response to intervention), classroom management, children and youth mental health, universal design for learning, and whole child development continue to drive initiatives to help close achievement gaps for students with special education needs.

The following section outlines the current climate for special education in Ontario, including demographic data, changes in reporting requirements for school boards and funding.

### B. Students with Special Education Needs in Ontario

The data below describes the number and placement of students with special education needs in Ontario's publicly funded school system as reported by all school boards.

- In 2006/07 (*preliminary data*) school boards reported:
  - 13.92% of the total student population, or 292,968 students were receiving special education programs and services.

Students formally identified as "Exceptional" by an IPRC				Students NOT formally identified as "Exceptional" by an IPRC			
	<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Percentage of panel</i>	<i>Percentage of all students</i>		<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Percentage of panel</i>	<i>Percentage of all students</i>
<i>Elementary</i>	102,044	7.34%	4.85%	<i>Elementary</i>	71,694	5.16%	3.41%
<i>Secondary</i>	96,341	13.48%	4.58%	<i>Secondary</i>	22,889	3.20%	1.09%
<b>Total</b>	<b>198,385</b>		<b>9.43%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>94,583</b>		<b>4.50%</b>

- Approximately 79% of all students (82% secondary) receiving special education are placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day.
  - At least 30,000 students reported to be receiving special education programs and services do not have an IEP.
- The above figures do not include approximately 5,000 students attending *Educational Programs for Pupils In Government Approved Care and/or Treatment, Custody and Correctional Facilities*. (Note: These students are not resident pupils of a school board or school authority.)



### **C. Changes in School Board Planning**

The ministry has been moving towards aligning the planning and reporting processes required for boards. Regulation 306 requires school boards and school authorities to maintain special education plans and amend the plans from time to time to meet the current needs of the exceptional pupils of the board. A report on the provision of special education programs and services is required to be prepared and approved by each board and submitted to the Ministry every second school year. It is also required that amendments are submitted in any year where the special education plan is amended by the board.

Boards have an obligation to maintain and update their special education plans by ensuring that any amendments are incorporated into the reports that are available to the public.

To reduce the administrative burden to boards in regards to reporting to the ministry, boards will have the option of submitting to the ministry an electronic copy rather than two paper copies of their updated 2008-09 special education plan.

### **D. Classroom Complexity**

Ontario's classrooms continue to change due to advances in instruction and assessment, demographics, technology and other factors. Teachers today are required to teach in an environment that includes students with multiple learning styles, (likes and dislikes), a variety of learning styles and who are from many different cultures and may not have English or French as a first language. This environment is also constantly changing technologically. The Ministry continues to anticipate these changes and strives to build teacher capacity to enable teachers to teach all of the students in their classroom to the best of their ability.

### **E. Outcomes & Indicators**

The Ontario School Information System (OnSIS) is a new, provincial data collection system that replaced the legacy collection of data through the October Elementary and Secondary School Reports. The legacy reports collected aggregate *school level* data on students receiving special education programs and services including information on (1) students formally identified through an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) and their exceptionalities, and placement; and (2) students not formally identified and their placements (i.e. instructional settings). The October Reports also collected school level aggregate information on the number of students that had received an Individual Education Plan (IEP).



## F. Funding

The Ministry of Education has increased special education funding through the Special Education Grant by \$544M since 2002-03, to a provincial total of approximately \$2.17B in 2008-09. All district school boards in Ontario have benefited from this increased funding. In addition, the Ministry has made a series of strategic investments in key special education initiatives (described below).

Staffing: Staffing in Ontario's school boards for student support services has increased since 2002-03 (services for all students not just student with special education needs; however students with special education needs require these services) Note: based on information provided by school boards for the 2007-08 school year (October 2007 – Revised Estimates)

Total Student Support Services (Professional/Para-Professional and Technical Support)

- 2,397 additional staff or an increase of 30.5%. These Student Support Services include:
  - Social Services – 265 additional staff or an increase of 35.6%
  - Psych Services – 225 additional staff or an increase of 50.4%
  - Attendance Counsellors – 2 additional staff or 1.2%
  - Other Professional Support Staff – 829 additional staff or 56.9%
- Total Education Assistants: 4,910 additional EAs or an increase of 28.8% (approximately 22,000 total EAs in 2007-08).

Strategic Investments: The Ministry is continuing to introduce reforms that will help support better outcomes for children with special needs, including those with ASD:

- \$20 million enabled the OPA to work with school boards to reduce waiting times for student assessments. This allowed more students' needs to be properly identified.
- \$53 million enabled CODE to support increased professional development and implement the recommendations of Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Educational Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6. This enhanced teachers' capacity to improve outcomes for students with special education needs.



- The Ministry has invested \$21 million, through targeted funding outside the Grants for Student Needs (GSN), in 2006 – 2008, to build capacity and improve the learning environment for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), including:
  - \$5M for Geneva Centre for Autism to train Teachers' Assistants (2006);
  - \$1M for Geneva Centre for Autism to provide principal training (August 2007);
  - \$3M for school team training (August 20-23, 2007);
  - \$4M to school boards to further school teams' Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) training (2007-08);
  - \$2M for Collaborative Service Delivery Models for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (2007-08);
  - \$2M for Geneva Summer Initiatives 2008 ABA training; and
  - \$4M for further ABA training in boards (2008-09).

## **G. Stakeholders**

Special Education encompasses a variety of stakeholders. The Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education (MACSE) brings together representatives of different exceptionality groups, education sectors, student and parent groups and professions to advise the Minister on special education matters. The Ministry works closely with MACSE, along with a wide range of stakeholders from across the province in developing policy and strategic directions for improving achievement for students with special education needs.

## **H. Link to Research**

As new instructional and assessment techniques continue to take hold in Ontario's changing schools, the Ministry of Education continues to work to close achievement gaps for students with special education needs through a variety of strategies and initiatives using research and capacity building initiatives, which are described in the following sections of this report.



## 2. RESEARCH OVERVIEW / CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

### A. Overview of Research Trends

Current Special Education research is informed by the pedagogical philosophy of John Abbot, president of the *21st Century Learning Initiative*. This initiative is based on the belief that school is only a part of the learning process, and there are other factors just as important in education (i.e., environment of the home, independent study, peer pressure, etc.). This perspective is grounded in studies in cognitive research that show how the behaviourist model of the human brain is outdated, and that the innate capacity for learning favours immersive environments rather than passive absorption. As research consistently suggests the high degree to which we are natural learners, teachers should try to impart independent learning.

The outdated mechanistic model tends to lead educators into a pedagogy that emphasizes solitary study, uninterrupted work on a single subject, and analytic abilities, while the organic system leads to one based on working with others, lateral thinking under constant distractions, and interdisciplinary problem-solving tasks. The latter is better suited to both our workforce and society which favours creativity and adaptive innovation rather than focused analysis as a whole. Abbot's work differentiates between "specialists" and "experts"; we groom specialists who are unable to manoeuvre outside of their own field instead of the experts that today's society requires. To attain experts, emphasis should be placed on the process of learning rather than the product, in order to adapt and apply acquired knowledge to new environments and contexts. While the mechanistic model has value, the student should be gradually weaned off the teacher's authority and become more of an active participant in his/her own education over time.

Abbot in particular pushes for six policy considerations: 1) Weaning students off the intensive reliance on the teacher and guide them toward becoming active learners with a vested interest in their own educational success; 2) As the students mature, teachers should see formal instruction as something to avoid and instead rely on teaching students to teach themselves; 3) Professional development should be seen as a continuous process with ideally 10% of staffing expenditure devoted to it; 4) Community resources should be opened up; 5) Information technologies should be used to close the gap between those who can afford it and those who cannot (20% of all expenditures should be allocated to IT and books by the time the student is 18 years old); and 6) Appropriate assessment systems to gauge these new models of learning should be implemented and disseminated within the community.



## **B. Research into Practice in Special Education**

The following Ministry of Education supported projects have a research and evaluation component that demonstrate linkages and alignments to the theories discussed above and include a focus on whole child development, student driven learning and community participation/parental engagement.

### ***In Progress***

#### **Web Based Teaching Tool**

The Web Based Teaching Tool (WBTT) is a tool for teachers to detect young students, JK to Grade 2, who may be struggling with their learning. Given the documented importance for early identification and intervention, the WBTT is designed to screen young learners for remedial/instructional supplements to their normal education. The resource features easy-to-use tracking software that can follow a student's progress throughout the years. During 2007-08, 30,000 students were screened, leading to 12,000 remedial interventions. The data from the previous year indicates a strong link between WBTT use and the activation of supports for students who are struggling. As Abbott frequently emphasizes, children have a broad-range of learning styles, and this tool is designed to better accommodate students whose aptitude may develop at differing rates.

#### **Dispute Resolution Pilots**

Pilot projects are currently running in six school boards to evaluate the effectiveness of dispute resolution techniques for conflicts regarding special education programs and services. An evaluation of these pilot projects will look for specific instances where community members outside the school are used to best assess a child's educational needs. The *21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Initiative* emphasizes the need for schools to draw on members of the community to contribute to the educational requirements of their students; dispute resolution addresses this concern in its commitment to create collaborative circles where students, parents and community experts meet to best address the challenging educational requirements of students with special needs. It also begins with an inventory of student strengths rather than deficiencies, thus creating educational environments where such students can learn *with* the flow of their own cognitive predispositions and into higher levels of achievement.



## **Ontario Psychological Association Student Assessment Project**

The Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) has worked on a psychological assessment project designed to reduce wait time for students with professional assessment needs, enhance system capacity, improve literacy and numeracy and sustain long-term assessment improvements. As with the WBTT, the project allows early identification of a student's learning needs and provides boards flexibility to identify detrimental factors on student achievement. Factors such as social and emotional function, self-esteem issues and behavioural problems are addressed through a variety of assessments and interventions. The removal of psychological obstacles will help students to more ably take control of their own learning.

### ***Future Direction***

#### **Broader Assessment Measures**

This project is based on a broader definition of achievement and accountability to promote a focus on the development of the whole child. Broader assessment measures for students with special education needs who are not meeting the provincial standard will be identified. This will include:

- Analysing data on EQAO results for students with special education needs in academic programs as well as investigating assessment measures for students who are not currently accessing the Ontario curriculum;
- Conducting jurisdictional and inter-jurisdictional research on alternative assessment tools; and
- Supporting school boards to enhance assessment practices on the achievement of students who are in programs where none of the student's learning expectations are derived from the Ontario curriculum.

#### **Children's Mental Health and Addictions**

Within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) Policy Framework (excluding section 23) the Ministry of Education is supporting MCYS to map the range of programs provided by school boards to support student mental health.

The initiatives highlighted work together to improve student achievement for all students, including those with special education needs, by providing educators with additional tools, supports, and strategies to better serve all students. The initiatives focus on:

- Improving system capacity, which will assist educators in identifying and assessing students with special education needs, and improving outcomes;



- Enhancing and building collaborative relationships and partnerships between families, schools, and the larger community;
- Improved integration and alignment of community supports to better serve students with special education needs; and
- Supporting and providing educators with additional strategies and tools to meet the diverse needs of all students.



### 3. CLOSING THE GAP STRATEGIES

#### A. Introduction

Closing the gap for all students with special education needs requires a collaborative approach that includes looking at the whole child and student. Also, closing the gap is not about categories of students and the “identifier”-- students with special education needs does not tell the whole story of the student. The Ministry has been pursuing initiatives that are highly focused on improving teacher capacity, building collaborative relationships with communities and other government partners involved and looking at broader measures of measuring achievement and learning will place more emphasis on a whole student approach.

Two of the guiding principles from *Education for All* are: all students can succeed and each child has his or her own unique patterns of learning. The challenge for the various elements of the education sector is to create and support the best possible learning environment for students to succeed and for them to reach their full learning potential.

As with other jurisdictions in North America, Ontario faces a number of ongoing pressures and issues in special education. These include: program; whole student development; stakeholder management and accountability and value for money.

#### B. Previous Initiatives and Strategies:

##### ***Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade to Six***

*Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade Six* (2005) is a foundational research driven expert panel report that provides direction in a variety ways to support learning for all students including those with special education needs. Some of the key gap closing strategies include: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Assistive Technology.

#### **Council of Ontario Directors (CODE)**

To support the release and implementation of the recommendations of *Education for All K - 6*, the Council of Ontario Directors of education (CODE) received \$53M over a three year period to work in partnership with the Ministry of Education and collaboratively with Ontario’s school boards to implement the recommendations of *Education for All K - 6*. The goal was to improve student achievement and to



enhance the capacity of classroom teachers to develop instructional strategies based on the concept of universal design for learning, differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technology.

### **C. Current Initiatives and Strategies**

#### ***Learning for All K-12***

The Special Education Policy and Programs Branch is developing a K - 12 resource guide as a follow-up to *Education for All K - 6*. The strategies in this resource guide will focus on understanding every student's needs and will expand on the strategies in *Education for All K-6* with particular focus on developing student profiles and linking instruction to assessment. The strategies in this guide will expand on the capacity building initiatives the Ministry of Education has been developing and implementing throughout PCS.

- The working title of the document is: *Learning for All K - 12/L'apprentissage pour tous: de la maternelle à la 12e année*.
- *Learning for All K - 12* describes an approach that teachers from Kindergarten through Grade 12 can implement to help them plan and deliver instruction that benefits all students, from high achievers to those who need additional support.
- *Learning for All K - 12* represents a first step in creating the kinds of integrated data, feedback and planning systems that educational researchers have envisioned to support sustained improvement in student achievement.
- *Learning for All K - 12* help teachers to focus on two teaching and learning components: personalization and precision.
- *Learning for All K - 12* is scheduled for release late May 2009.

#### **Individual Education Plans (IEPs)**

The Ministry is working closely with education partners to support the development of effective IEPs that are aligned with curriculum expectations and the report card. As part of the ministry's continuing effort to support the development and implementation of effective IEPs, a website containing of sample IEPs for both the elementary and secondary panels is now available. These samples are intended to be a resource to all staff involved in the development and implementation of the IEP.

The posted IEP samples have been developed by writing teams from across the province. The teams used ministry policy and resource documents, the results of the Provincial IEP Collaborative Review (2006/07) and IEP samples provided by school boards and stakeholder groups in June 2008 to inform their work. The samples are written using the provincial electronic IEP template.



A web-based electronic IEP template was deployed in 2007 and provincial training was provided. Use of this template is voluntary; however, school boards are expected to have a template which enables them to meet their regulatory requirements and Ministry standards regarding the development of IEPs.

### **Collaborative Services**

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services are supporting Collaborative Service Delivery Models for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in seven sites involving eight school boards and relevant community agencies in 2007-08. The models are focusing on:

- Harmonizing Transitions – transition of student information protocol (pre-school to school; primary to secondary); seamless transitions;
- Transitioning Together – grade to grade; semester to semester;
- Individual Student Support Teams for Students with ASD – to collaboratively assess, plan for, and implement strategies to enable students with ASD to be successful in school and in the community;
- Parent Engagement in Diverse Communities;
- Integrating Students with High-Functioning ASD in the Classroom;
- Transitions – primary to junior; intermediate to secondary; and
- Data Collection and Behavioural Intervention Plan – for individual students with ASD who are struggling.

It is expected that support for collaborative service delivery models will continue and be expanded in 2008-09.

### **D. Changes: What is Different and Why?**

As a result of the past initiatives such as *Education for All* along with the CODE Projects and OPA we have made notable improvements.

The 2007-08 EQAO results show an improvement in test results for students with special education needs. Part of the improvements can be attributed to:

- Focus on good practices:

*“EQAO assessments are directly linked to the learning expectations set out in The Ontario Curriculum, so student performance on these tests provides the education system with important information about where to focus attention”*

Marguerite Jackson, EQAO Chief Executive Officer

- Funding stability
- CODE projects supported reading and writing (up to Gr. 6)



During this period, significant improvements were made in writing:

- Grade 3: +17% special education vs. +2% province
- Grades 6: +11% special education vs. +6% province

In addition Reading results also improved for special education population

- Grade 3: +3% special education vs. -1% province
- Grades 6: +3% special education vs. +2% province

## **E. Looking Forward**

The Ministry continues to work diligently to support school boards to continue to close the gap for students with special education needs. A combination of research that focuses on whole child development with continued investment in capacity building (for educators, students, parents and school boards) will help transform special education in Ontario to be responsive to each students' strengths and needs.

Providing educators and school boards with the tools necessary to prepare all students for further achievement in school and beyond is a culmination of the Ministry's overall goals:

- High levels of student achievement
- Reduced gaps in student achievement
- Increased public confidence in publicly funded education

The overall government strategy, now and in the future, requires a concerted focus on the effective implementation of evidence-informed instructional strategies that benefit all students, and particularly those who require more support. The Ministry endeavours to continue to support evidence-informed research and capacity building throughout Ontario's publicly funded school system.



## 4. Challenges

Continued change in Ontario is reflected in its classrooms. The following changes are particularly important to the future of closing the student achievement gap for students with special education needs, and all are considered by the Ministry in policy development and research.

### A. Ontario's economy

Ontario's economic situation in the current global financial crisis has put strain on many government programs, including the Education Sector. Ensuring that capacity building continues during strained financial times is a priority for the Ministry of Education. The Ministry is committed to ensuring all students continue to succeed and to help close the gaps.

### B. Demographics

Ontario's population continues to grow and change. Since 2001, most of Ontario's population growth has taken place in urban areas. In 2006, more than 85% of Ontarians were living in urban areas. Ontario's population is extremely diverse and includes many ethnic groups and cultures.

The Ministry of Finance has released the following projections for Ontario for the period 2007-2031:

- Over the projection period, net migration will account for 74% of total population growth. The share of annual population growth accounted for by net migration will rise gradually over the projection period, from 61 per cent in 2007–08 to 86 per cent by 2030–31. Immigration is by far the largest component of net migration.
- The median age of Ontario's population is projected to rise to 43 years in 2031 from 39 years in 2007. The median age for women climbs from 39 to 44 years, and the median age for men increases from 38 to 42 years.

These demographic shifts need to be taken into account when considering how to plan to continue to close the achievement gap for students with special education needs.

<http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/economy/demographics/projections/#s2>

### C. Class size

The Ontario government now provides school boards with almost \$420 million in annual funding to hire more teachers to reduce primary class sizes. This



funding supports 5,100 additional primary teaching positions across the province.

Today, there are over 610,000 students in kindergarten to Grade 3. All of these students are in classes of 23 students and under, and over 540,000 are in classes containing 20 students or less.

Changes in class size have required students and teachers to adjust to new instructional and assessment practices as required, particularly for students with special education needs.

#### **D. Integration / Inclusion**

In Ontario, students with special education needs are regularly placed in regular classrooms where they receive programs and services. Today, approximately 79% of all students (82% secondary) receiving special education are placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day. As teacher capacity continues to grow, Ontario's classrooms will continue to include students with many learning styles, including those with special education needs.



## 5. CONCLUSION

The focus of special education in Ontario will continue to balance measurable achievement and personal growth for students with special education needs. This focus takes into account the different strengths and needs of all students receiving special education programs and services.

While EQAO scores and report cards are invaluable for providing a provincial snapshot of student achievement, we must recognize that such indicators concentrate on specific areas only, and can often lead to assumptions about their weight in terms of student achievement and development. Educators need to consider not only test results, but the overall well-being of their students in many areas of life.

Teachers facilitate the development of a wide-range of skills to enable students to become better independent learners, with an interdisciplinary scope and an ability to cope in today's complex world. As such, educators continue to adapt to a world that requires a workforce adept in adaptive intelligence and interdisciplinary problem-solving, by providing much more than the mere transfer of information. Tomorrow's learners will need to be efficient in many knowledge areas, including the skills required for life long learning. Continued evidence based research that informs instruction and whole child development, combined with a commitment to capacity building in all areas of educational life, will better equip all students to succeed today and in the future.



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<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/planningentry.pdf>

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reach every student  
appuyer chaque élève



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