

Special Education in Ontario
“Closing the Gap as the Overarching Goal:
Changing Special Education Practices and Outcomes”

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ABSTRACT

Closing the Gap as the Overarching Goal: Changing Special Education Practices and Outcomes

This paper details the evolution of support for Ontario students with special education needs. It outlines some key milestones, including a research-based expert panel report and recommendations of a multi-stakeholder Working Table on Special Education Reform. Changes identified as necessary to transform special education included building a strong emphasis on sound instructional practices, and shifting: from a focus on process to a focus on student learning and progress; from a focus on compliance to a focus on accountability for results; from a model of reaction to prevention; and from a focus on access to special education programs and services, to a focus on general education for all students with special education needs. Results of the changes implemented to date are described.

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Introduction

The Ontario educational system has seen an evolution of support for its students with special education needs. In the early years, Ontario provided opportunities for these students to participate in the education system, but often without the necessary supports for learning and more often outside of the public educational settings of the general population. Over time, Ontario recognized that the publicly funded school system must be “responsible” for the education of all Ontario students including those with special education needs. This was reinforced through the introduction of Bill 82 in 1980 and its accompanying regulations.

In the years following Bill 82, Ontario saw greater investments to support students with special education needs with the enveloping of funds to ensure that these investments were targeted to the students that needed them, with more educational assistants and other human resource supports, and with more students being included in regular classrooms. The question is how well are we truly supporting their “learning needs”? Are the investments making a difference in the learning and life-skill outcomes of these students?

This paper describes the evolution of support for Ontario’s students with special education needs, outlines some key milestones and the current shift in focus from ensuring supports for these students to also ensuring “student achievement”, “closing the achievement gap” and building “public confidence” in the Ontario publicly funded school system.

These students and their families have the same aspirations as the rest of the educational community – they want “student success”.

The Ontario Context

Ontario is Canada’s most populous province; containing 12.8 million of Canada’s 33.2 million people. The province of Ontario is located in the central part of Canada and is the second largest province in geography after Quebec. Ontario is bordered by the provinces of Manitoba to the west, Quebec to the east and the American states of Michigan, New York and Minnesota. Ontario covers an area of over 415,000 square miles. The province is characterized by large urban centers in the south located beside or close to the Great Lakes, surrounded by rural, agricultural areas and increasingly less populated areas as one heads north as far as the Hudson Bay.

Seventy-seven percent of Ontarians speak English as a first language, 5% speak French, and 18% report speaking “other” mother tongues. The capital of Ontario, Toronto, is the largest city in Canada. Toronto has a population of just over 2.5 million people living in Toronto proper and approximately 5.6 million people living in the Greater Toronto Area. Toronto is also the financial centre of Canada. There is a large and thriving multicultural population in the province.

Ontario Education Background

Public elementary and secondary education is a provincial responsibility in Canada's federated system of governance. There is no national education ministry. Ontario's publicly funded education system has over two million students in 4,002 elementary and 884 secondary schools. The schools are administered through 72 school boards, and 32 school authorities which serve remote and distinct communities. The province provides educational services through both public (non-religious) and Catholic schools and school boards. There are English and French-language schools and school boards. There are 31 English public school boards, 29 English Catholic school boards, 4 French public and 8 French Catholic school boards. The Ontario Ministry of Education is also responsible for the direct administration of five Provincial Schools' sites (including four for deaf students and one for blind and deafblind students), and four Demonstration Schools (for students with severe learning disabilities).

Ontario's Education Priorities

The Ontario government has identified three key priorities to support the government's direction for education and to improve the achievement of students in elementary and secondary schools. These priorities are:

- Increased Student Achievement
- Reduced Gaps in Student Achievement
- Increased Confidence in Publicly Funded Education

The Liberal government was recently re-elected for a second term and announced that it will continue to focus on these same three goals, that there will be no new goals, and, that our strategies are to deepen implementation of these goals in order to raise the bar and close the gap on student achievement.

The government has committed to specific targets to support these priorities:

- Smaller Class Sizes
 - Each primary class will have no more than 23 students
 - 90% of primary classrooms will have 20 students or fewer
- Improved Achievement in Reading, Writing and Math
 - By 2008, 75% of Grade 6 students to meet or exceed the provincial standard in reading, writing and math
- More Students Graduating
 - Increase graduation rates to 85% by 2010-2011.

Roots of Ontario Reforms in Special Education

1950s: The Beginnings The first significant look at special education in Ontario came with the *Royal Commission on Education* in Ontario, 1950, also known as the *Hope Report*¹. This report signalled a significant expansion of special education programs to serve children with learning disabilities. During the decade of the 1950s, the number of special education classes doubled and health services became more common, though largely confined to urban areas. Given a conviction that all of Ontario's children must have greater opportunity and equality of educational opportunity, special education became a preoccupation during the 1960s and 1970s.

1960s: The Decade of Education Reform The next major education reform came in 1962 when the *Robarts Plan*² completely reorganized the high school program of studies. This educational reform initiative introduced three programs of equal status: arts and sciences; business and commerce; science, technology, and trades. Students were streamed into one of three options: a five-year program leading to university; a four-year program leading to entry into employment at the end of Grade 12, or to the new system of colleges of Applied Arts and Technology; and a two-year program designed for direct employment after age 16. Among the results of this significant policy change was a decrease in the dropout rate for secondary school students and an increase in the number of students who stayed in school to obtain a graduation diploma. Between 1960 and 1971 the proportion of the age group fifteen to nineteen that remained in school rose from 62 to 77 per cent. By the latter year, 80 per cent of those who entered Grade 9 three years earlier were enrolled in Grade 12 and 65 per cent of them received their Grade 12 graduation diploma.

In 1968 the Hall-Dennis Report, *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*³, was released. A key component of this report was the reinforcement of "the right of every individual to have equal access to the learning experience best suited to his/her needs, and the responsibility of every school authority to provide a child centred learning continuum that invites learning by individual discovery and inquiry". This report served as a catalyst for dramatic changes in classroom teaching throughout the province. As the Ministry of Education was committed to this proposition, grants rose, a special branch of the ministry was created to promote the development of special services, and, in 1969 boards were mandated to assume responsibility for all but the most severe cases of mental retardation. By the late sixties, the majority of boards offered a modicum of services, most commonly classes for 'slow learners' including the moderately retarded. But coverage was spotty at best, both in terms of geography and the variety of needs met; and services at the secondary level hardly existed.

¹ *Report of the Royal Commission on Education in Ontario*, 1950.

² Robarts Plan – *Reorganized Program of Studies*, 1962

³ Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario, *Living and Learning* {Hall-Dennis Report}, Toronto, Newton Publishing Co, 1968

Paralleling these developments was the emergence of a new pedagogical model whereby it was argued that most children with exceptionalities were better served when they stayed with their peers in a regular classroom, receiving special assistance along the way, rather than being isolated in segregated classes.

The 1960s laid the groundwork for change. The belief that **all** children had the right to the best education that society could provide, and that that encompassed those students with special education needs, had finally resonated in Ontario education. Influential lobby groups demanding that such commitment be made explicit were established. The most important of these groups was the *Ontario Association for Children and Learning Disabilities* (OACLD) founded in 1963. This organization established local chapters throughout Ontario, united parents and those who worked with exceptional children in a variety of capacities, and not only lobbied vigorously for better services, but provided parents with a place to go for assistance and advice.

1970s: The Implementation of Further Reforms Throughout the 1970s, the major reforms initiated in the previous decade were implemented in Ontario classrooms. New program policies, credits, and diploma requirements were introduced, accompanied by new teaching techniques, often in dramatically altered classroom settings, including the concept of the open classroom. By 1978, some \$369⁴ million was being spent on special education in Ontario's schools, there were nearly 11,000 special education teachers, and 120,000 students were receiving some services, yet it was estimated that 15,000 students were on waiting lists, and another 15,000 were yet to be diagnosed.

1980s: The Focus on Special Education By 1980, the context for *Bill 82* was in place. In December 1978 three interrelated announcements were made by the Minister of Education.⁵ The first was a directive to boards 'requiring them to offer an Early Identification Program to ensure the learning needs of every child entering schools will be identified. It is essential that physical, mental, emotional, or learning disabilities be identified early so that remedial programs can be provided promptly. Boards will begin to implement this program by September 1979 and it should be fully operational by 1981'. A second memorandum instructed boards 'to provide educational programs for children with learning disabilities'. And finally, a significant piece of legislation followed shortly that spelled out the details of how this was to be accomplished. On December 12, 1980, *An Act to Amend the Education Act*⁶, often referred to as *Bill 82*, came into effect in Ontario.

The central component of *Bill 82* was the requirement that the publicly funded school system in Ontario be responsible for the education of **all** Ontario students including those with special education needs in their language of instruction. For the first time, school boards in Ontario were required to provide special education programs and services to exceptional pupils or to purchase these services through an agreement with another publicly funded school board. Prior to the passage of *Bill 82*, school boards could offer

⁴ Ontario Ministry of Education (1978). *Special Populations*, p. 37. Toronto: Author.

⁵ *Ontario Education Dimensions* (1978). Toronto: Author.

⁶ *Bill 82, An Act to Amend the Education Act*, December, 1980

such programs and services, but were under no obligation to do so, with the result that there was significant variation in the provision of special education programs and services among boards across the province.

Aspects of *Bill 82* and subsequent regulations included the following requirements: early and ongoing identification and assessment of learning abilities and needs of students; the establishment of *Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs)*; the involvement of parents or guardians of exceptional pupils in assessment, identification, and placement processes; the involvement of parent associations in school boards' *Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs)*; the right of parents to appeal decisions related to the identification or placement by an *Identification, Placement, and Review Committee* of the board; and, the extension of the right to provide programs for children with developmental disabilities to Roman Catholic School Boards, thus enabling separate schools to provide special education programs and services for **all of their students**.

The implementation of *Bill 82* led to high expectations on the part of parents and advocacy groups that the ministry itself would protect the rights of students with exceptionalities and would ensure the compliance of school boards with the processes enshrined in legislation and regulation. Teachers developed new skills through additional training in order to respond to the program needs of pupils they now had in their regular classrooms. In summary, as a result of *Bill 82*, schools took on a broader responsibility for the education of **all of Ontario's students**.

Following the implementation period of *Bill 82*, in 1986 the ministry established the *Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education*⁷ (MACSE) which was comprised of 20 voting members and 4 non-voting members. Membership on MACSE includes provincial parents' associations representing all of the exceptionalities⁸, professions, trustees and educator groups, students/youth, aboriginal communities, catholic and francophone communities and non-voting ministry representatives from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities, and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. The mandate of MACSE continues to be one of providing advice to the Minister of Education on the provision of special education programs and services and the identification and provision of early intervention programs. The Council also responds to ministry policy proposals and positions, raises concerns and promotes successful practices. MACSE has had a pivotal role in modelling and building the policy direction towards more collaborative services for students with special education needs.

Bill 82 was part of a worldwide movement towards providing all children with the opportunity for a publicly funded education, regardless of disability. In a parallel development in the United States, a landmark piece of legislation, the *Education for All*

⁷ *Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education (MACSE)*, OIC, 1986

⁸ Exceptionalities include: *Behaviour; Autism; Deaf and Hard of Hearing; Language Impairment; Learning Disabilities; Gifted; Mild Intellectual; Developmental Disabilities; Physical; Blind and Low Vision, and Multiple*.

*Handicapped Children Act*⁹, was passed in 1975. Amended over time, this legislation is now known as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* or *IDEA*.

1990s: Meeting Special Education Needs Through legislation, regulations, and policy statements, the Ministry of Education continued to make special education a high priority in the 1990s. In 1991, the Minister of Education announced that “The integration of exceptional pupils into local community classrooms should be the norm in Ontario, wherever possible, when such a placement meets the pupil's needs, and when it is according to parental choice”. In 1994, the Deputy Minister of Education stated in a memo that: “The Ministry of Education and Training remains committed to the principle that the integration of exceptional pupils should be the normal practice in Ontario, when such a placement meets the pupil's needs and is in accordance with parental wishes. A range of options including placement in a special class or provincial or demonstration school will continue to be available for pupils whose needs cannot be met within the regular classroom.” In 1995, the Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, *For the Love of Learning*,¹⁰ recommended the integration of students with special education needs into regular classrooms, with classroom support when necessary, while acknowledging the appropriateness of other placements, including acceleration for gifted students.

Additional Milestones Human rights legislation, both federal and provincial, has also had a significant impact on the rights of students with disabilities and their access to special education programs and services in Ontario schools. In 1962, the Government of Ontario repealed most of its human rights laws in order to make way for the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, the first comprehensive human rights code in Canada. The *Code* affirmed the right to equal access to services, including education. However, it was not until 1982 that human rights legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of “handicap” was proclaimed. Over its 40-year history, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* has been an important initiative in advancing the rights of students.

At the federal government level, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which came into effect in 1982, stipulates that every individual is equal before and under the law, and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability.

The *Ontario Human Rights Code* also supports equal treatment for all individuals. In 1989, the Human Rights Commission, which administers the *Code*, published its *Guidelines on Assessing Accommodation Requirements for Persons with Disabilities*, and, in 2000, it approved a revised version of its *Policy and Guidelines on Disability and the Duty to Accommodate*. This document sets out a broad definition of disability, from a human rights perspective, along with key policy positions on the duty to accommodate and the undue hardship standard. In 2004, the Commission published *Guidelines on*

⁹ Public Law 94 – 142 – *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, 1975.

¹⁰ *For the Love of Learning*: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning (1994). Toronto. Author.

Accessible Education that provides guidance to support education providers and students with disabilities in the fulfilment of their duties and rights under the *Code*.

Special Education in Ontario Today

Context Approximately 290, 000 or 14% of the population of students in publicly funded elementary and secondary education receives special education programs and services. Nearly two-thirds of these students have been identified as “exceptional” using one of 12 categories of exceptionality (see chart below) issued to school boards by the Ministry of Education; the other one-third of students have not been formally identified, but are reported by school boards to be receiving special education programs and services.

Breakdown of the Twelve Exceptionalities

Exceptionality	Percentage	Exceptionality	Percentage
Learning Disabilities	43.3%	Multiple	5.1%
Gifted	13.0%	Autism	4.1%
Mild Intellectual	12.9%	Physical	1.6%
Behaviour	6.8%	Deaf and Hard of Hearing	1.2%
Language Impairment	5.9%	Blind and Low Vision	0.4%
Developmental Disability	5.2%	Speech Impairment	0.3%

Approximately 82% of all students and 86% at the secondary level receiving special education in the province are placed in regular classrooms for more than half of the instructional day. Approximately 32,000 students who are reported to be receiving special education programs and services do not have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). However, there is a large variance in the models, including integrated models across the province. For example, the largest school board reports that 40% of its students are in congregated classrooms, while the majority of other school boards are reporting that almost all of their students with special education needs are receiving instruction in regular classrooms. There are also some school boards who are reporting that they are moving toward a more integrated model.

When the *IPRC* identifies a student as exceptional, the principal must ensure that an *Individual Education Plan (IEP)* is developed and maintained for that pupil in accordance with the ministry policy document: *Individual Education Plans: Standards for Development, Program Planning, and Implementation*¹¹, 2000. Input from parents or

¹¹ Ontario Ministry of Education (2000). *Individual Education Plan: Standards for Development, Program Planning, and Implementation*. Toronto: Author.

guardians must be included in the development of the *IEP*. Students 16 years or older must also be consulted. The *IEP* identifies the student's particular learning expectations and outlines how the school will address these expectations through appropriate special education programs and services. It also identifies how the student's progress will be reviewed. The *IEP* is modified on the basis of continuous evaluation and assessment. School boards have the discretion to develop an *IEP* for a student who is not identified as exceptional by an *IPRC* but who nevertheless requires a special education program and services to demonstrate learning in an appropriate manner. The ministry has developed resource documents¹² to assist school board officials, principals, teachers, students and their families, health care workers, and community workers in meeting the planning and regulatory requirements for students with an *IEP*.

The Foundations of Our Transformation

Two milestones were significant in the government's strategic focus towards improving student achievement and ensuring accountability for the use of public funds with respect to students with special education needs. The first was the release of *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6* in 2005. This report followed the establishment by the Ministry of Education of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in November 2004 whose primary role is to support school boards in improving student achievement.

The guiding principles in the Expert Panel Report contributed to the findings and recommendations of the Working Table. These guiding principles are:

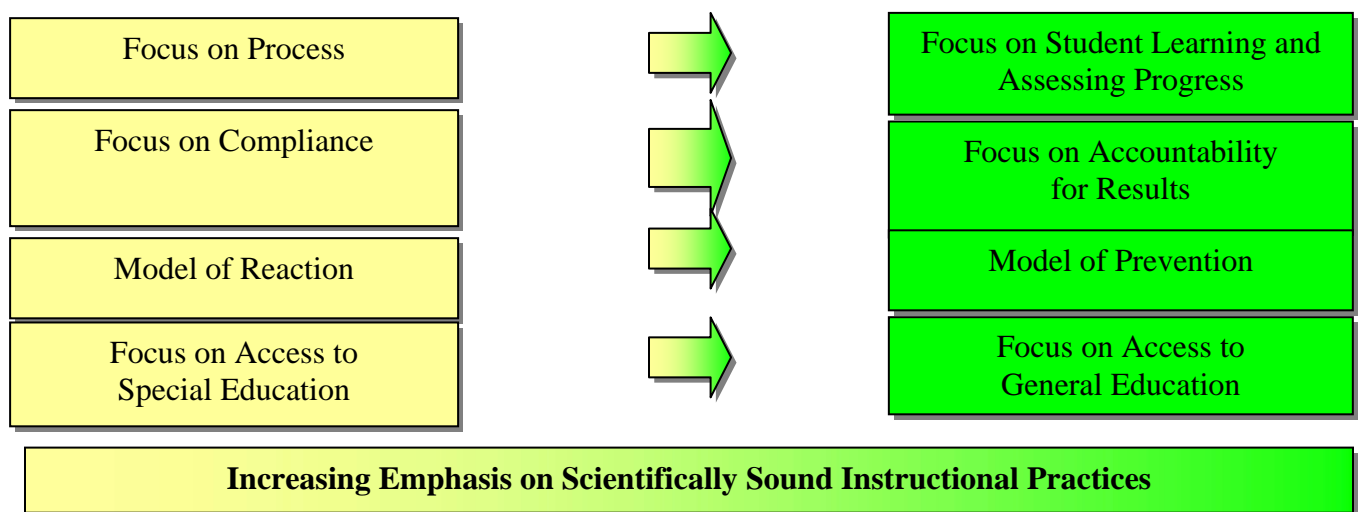
- All students can succeed.
- Universal design and differentiated instruction are effective and interconnected means of meeting the learning or productivity needs of any group of students.
- Successful instructional practices are founded on evidence-based research, tempered by experience.
- Classroom teachers are the key educators for a student's literacy and numeracy development.
- Each child has his or her own unique patterns of learning.
- Classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports students with special education needs.
- Fairness is not sameness.

The Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE), with financial support from the Ministry of Education, has overseen the implementation of school-based projects aimed at implementing the concepts and approaches recommended in *Education for All* in order to improve the achievement of students with special education needs.

¹² Ministry of Education (2002). *Transition Planning: A Resource Guide*, Toronto: Author;
Ministry of Education (2004). *The IEP Resource Guide*. Toronto. Author

The government has made a commitment to expand *Education for All* to an “Education for All K – 12” document in order to support students with special education needs in both elementary and secondary schools.

A second milestone was the establishment in May 2005 of a *Working Table on Special Education Reform* by the Minister of Education to look at how program policy, funding, and accountability at the school, board, and ministry levels might best be changed to support a system for special education that aligns with the government’s overall strategic goals for education. This inquiry resulted in a number of recommendations for the future of special education in Ontario. The following chart illustrates the changes the *Report*¹³ identified that would be necessary to transform special education in Ontario’s publicly funded education system:



The Vision of a Transformed System

In a transformed system, special education programs and services would support a learning environment that enables students to acquire, demonstrate, and apply the knowledge and skills necessary to maximize their potential use for success in school and beyond. Based on their individual learning needs and abilities, all students would receive supports in schools that foster a culture of commitment to achievement.

The Ontario curriculum would be the primary focus for students’ learning and demonstrated achievement. All students would be engaged in learning and their achievements would be valued and recognized. Student achievement in other skill areas would also need to be recognized. Students would have access to the supports, services, program, and range of placements that they need so that they can achieve their potential.

Strong leadership at the school, school board and ministry levels would contribute to an environment of collaboration, respect and trust. Educators and support staff would have

¹³ Ontario Ministry of Education (2006). *Special Education Transformation. The report of the Co-Chairs with the Recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education*. Toronto: Author.

access to ongoing professional development and training opportunities so that they would have the skills and knowledge to effectively recognize and meet a wide range of students' learning needs. Parents would be active participants in decisions related to the program and service provisions for their children.

In order to achieve the desired transformation and realize the vision for special education in Ontario, the *Working Table on Special Education Reform* identified the following critical issues that would need to be addressed

- Student Success and Access to Curriculum
- Professional Development
- Identification and Support Options
- Service Integration
- Parent Collaboration
- Accountability and Reporting
- Research
- Special Education Funding

Vision and Priorities for Special Education

As a result of these two milestones, the province's vision and priorities for special education have been identified. These are the same as the overall student achievement agenda of the government and include:

- Improved outcomes for students receiving special education programs and services;
- Increased capacity of schools to effectively meet the needs of a variety of learners in settings ranging from regular to self-contained classrooms;
- Programming in the IEP that is linked to the Ontario curriculum and the Provincial Report Card;
- More cooperative connections and better communication among schools, other sectors and families of students facing learning challenges; promoting a positive environment;
- Improved balance between a focus on teaching and learning, and the need for appropriate process, documentation and accountability;
- Increased para-professional/support staff (e.g. Child and Youth Workers, Social Workers) and alignment of processes to meet multiple government agendas;
- Enhanced transition planning “into”, “through”, and “exiting” school;
 - Expand tracking of students receiving special education programs and services in Ontario to include: District School Boards, Isolate and Hospital School Authorities (S.68 school authorities), Care, Treatment and Corrections Educational Programs, Provincial (Students who are Blind, Deaf and Deaf-Blind) and Demonstration Schools (Students with Severe Learning Disabilities);
- Improved school leadership through elementary and secondary principal development;
- Enhanced team training and access to resource staff;

- Increased inter-ministerial initiatives to support students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), children with mental health needs and other students requiring coordinated services/collaborative models, through enhanced role of Care, Treatment and Corrections Educational Programs, ASD and other collaborative models, and continued team training.

Moving Forward on Strategic Directions in Special Education

Following recommendations made to the government by the *Working Table on Special Education*, in its report *Special Education Transformation* (May 2006), the ministry has introduced several reforms to support better outcomes for students who receive special education programs and services in Ontario.

1) Improved outcomes for students receiving special education

Assessment Results and Closing the Gap on Student Achievement

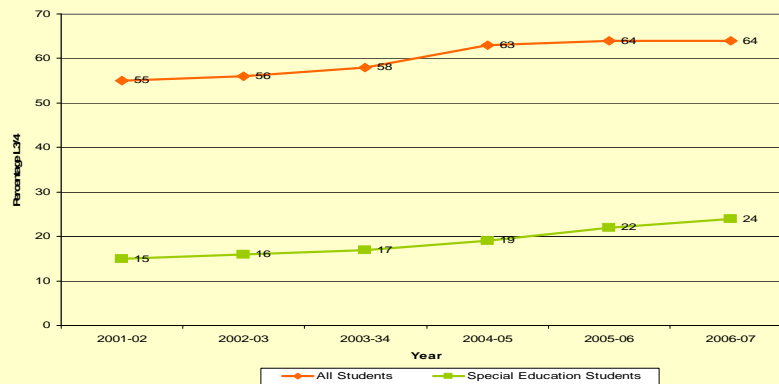
The ministry is promoting a number of strategies to enable as many students with special education as possible to be included in the government's targets of:

- 75% of all students performing at the provincial standard (Level 3) in Grade 6 reading, writing and math provincial assessments by 2008; and
- an 85% secondary school graduation rate by 2010-11.

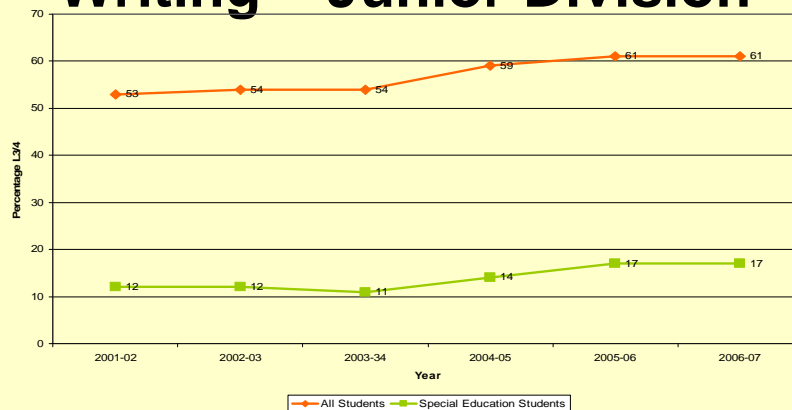
Since our special education population accounts for 14% of our students, without significant improvement, our targets will be at risk. Planning for the attainment of these targets is enhanced by carefully monitoring and analyzing provincial assessment student achievement results and exemption rates, as well as student achievement in classroom assessments as measured through the IEP, where appropriate, and reported on the provincial report card. Provincial assessment results for students with special education needs are improving gradually; however, a substantial gap in performance remains. This is particularly concerning when a substantial number of students with special education needs in the province have exceptionalities or characteristics that are indicative of average learning abilities (e.g., learning disabilities).

Provincial assessment results through the Ontario Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) for Grades 3 and 6 in Reading and Writing (see charts below) clearly illustrate the gap between the achievement of all students and the achievement of students with special education needs. These charts illustrate that the achievement levels of our students is improving; however, despite large investments of over \$450M, we are not closing the gap. Junior Reading went up for all students by 9 percentage points, as well as for students with special education needs. When looking at Junior Writing, the gap actually widened between 2001-02 and 2006-07 (from a difference of 41 to 44 points) as the general student population went up 8 percentage points and students with special education needs increased by only 5 points.

EQAO Results Junior - Reading English Language Students



EQAO Results Writing – Junior Division



With respect to our government's education priorities and the potential strategies in relation to the persisting gap in student achievement on EQAO tests for students with special education needs, the Ministry of Education continues to have the highest expectations for all of our students. At the same time, we recognize that we need broader definitions of success and achievement beyond the EQAO numeric measures. In that vein, we have a pilot project to develop resources that will enable teachers to assess both the demonstration of curriculum expectations in the Ontario curriculum, as well as the demonstration of "essential skills and skill levels," with the goal to develop a provincial skills certificate. Resources in development include program materials that have been altered to accommodate students with special education needs that support modified or alternate learning expectations.

Special Education Program and Financial Review

The ministry is currently undertaking a special education program and financial pilot review in selected school boards. The purpose of the review is for the ministry and school boards to work collaboratively to collect information about program and financial decision-making processes related to the planning and delivery of special education programs and services, and to determine if successful student outcomes are resulting from special education programs and services.

The review has been completed in a number of district school boards. Boards that were selected represent diverse program delivery models in the area of special education. For example, some boards offer special education programs in regular classrooms, while others offer a range of classroom placements. Some offer special education programs only to students who have been identified as 'exceptional' through the Identification and Placement Review Committee (IPRC), while others offer such programs to students who have not been formally identified as exceptional.

To date, the pilot review has been completed in five district school boards (four English-language and one French-language). Each participating board has received a report that summarizes the findings from their board. The Minister of Education will receive a report outlining the trends that were noted in the boards reviewed, successful practices and challenges, and recommendations for a process of cyclical reviews for all boards to review their planning and provision of special education programs and services.

2) Increased capacity of schools to effectively meet the needs of a wide range of learners

Special Education Project – Council of Ontario Directors of Education

The Ministry of Education provided the Ontario Council of Directors of Education (CODE) with \$53 million 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 contained in *Education for All*. The goal of the project is: to **improve student achievement** and to **enhance the capacity of classroom teachers to develop**

instructional strategies based on universal design for learning, differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technology.

Projects focused on supporting and advancing the capacity of classroom, school and district leaders to use evidence-informed decision-making to improve achievement for students with special education needs and teacher professional practice. The projects adopted a coaching model to support school boards across Ontario to improve learning and achievement for students with special education needs.

The research and evaluation framework of the project was to support and describe the strategies and actions school boards implemented that reflect the principle elements identified through the project, and to evaluate the impact the strategic actions had on improving achievement for students with special education needs and on teacher professional practice. The principle elements included:

- consistent use of assessment instruments and practices to measure, monitor and evaluate outcomes for students and staff;
- application of assessment data to inform development of universal design and differentiated instructional strategies;
- use of professional learning teams at all levels to improve teaching and learning;
- school principal as instructional leaders for both school and board staff;
- use of regular, scheduled school-based coaching focused on effective assessment and instruction;
- timely access to new and existing teacher resources to support learning;
- school and system organizational structures designed to meet contextual needs related to improving student learning;
- precision in system-level project design, implementation and monitoring by supervisory officers; and
- communication strategies that focused on developing common language, a sense of urgency, consistent messages and building a common vision about effective instruction.

Research Direction Based on the lessons learned and successful practices identified in year one of the project, the 2006 – 07 Special Education Project focused on supporting and advancing the capacity of classroom, school and district leaders to use evidence-informed decision-making to improve achievement for students with special education needs and teacher professional practice. All of the projects incorporated evidence-based instructional strategies found in *Education for All* (2005).

A mixed model research design was used (quantitative, qualitative, reflective activity data) from a variety of project stakeholders (superintendents of special education, consultants, principals, teachers, special education resource teachers (SERTS), and other support personnel within school boards). Over 90% of the projects took place in the elementary panel and focused primarily on literacy achievement.

Project Outcomes for Students: Two key project outcomes for students have been in assessing student outcomes and in the evidence of change in student achievement.

Every team in every school board has reported on the value of data to support both improved student achievement and changing teacher practice. 75% of a study sample in 2006 – 07 indicates improvements in reading, oral language and writing.

Project Outcomes for Teachers: As a result of the project, there is evidence of change in teacher knowledge and practices. The benefits of using effective assessment and instructional strategies have begun to show results in improved student outcomes. Teachers are using student data to design instructional strategies and interventions for individual students and now think of themselves as being accountable for student achievement, rather than being held accountable to administrators.

Professional Practices Used to Support Student Learning: A variety of professional practices are being used to support student learning. These include: professional learning teams **77%**; differentiated instruction **74%**; peer/school-based coaching **58%**; teacher collaboration **64%**; assistive technology **48%**; data-based dialogues/use of data **49%**; and assessment for learning **48%**. Other evidence-based instructional strategies include the use of student profiles, assessment schedules, classroom profiles and universal design.

Project Outcomes for School Administrators – Evidence of Instructional Leadership: The increased participation in scheduled school-based coaching and professional learning teams through the projects indicates that school principals are fostering a supportive climate for joint work. The projects reflect a **69%** increase in the use of scheduled school-based coaching and a **58.2%** increase in the use of professional learning teams. Principals are creating and sustaining the adaptive structures that change the way classroom and special education teachers work together, and they are fostering the development of peer coaching and classroom research.

Project Outcomes for School Board Superintendents: There is evidence that supports the notion that a major change initiative has fostered a culture of change, where instructional leadership has provided ongoing support and monitoring of the school projects, and whereby there is alignment, coherence and focus with an increase in the collaboration among departments. The role of superintendents as leaders in this major change initiative has been critical. As a result of the projects, many system leaders are making it a priority to provide the required professional learning and formalized structures with respect to professional learning communities. New initiatives with assistive technology have also promoted this cohesion.

Provincial Level Outcomes: The projects have been a significant force in fostering collective responsibility and improvement in knowledge and practices across Ontario. Key partners in this project were the Special Education Policy and Programs Branch, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, and the Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategic Planning Branch, all of the Ministry of Education.

Special Education Project Results - Evidence of Improvement

The following samples illustrate the evidence of student success within district school boards as a result of the project.

Result: In one board, 100% of parents surveyed after their child's involvement in the CODE project confirm that the project improved their child's performance, abilities, and confidence.

Why: The parents confirm that explicit differentiated teaching strategies provided to students with a step-by-step approach translated into success for students with special education needs.

Results: A junior kindergarten to Grade 8 school shared its 2006-07 EQAO results. This school has been involved in CODE projects for the past two-and-one-half years. Results for students with special education needs (excluding gifted) in Grade 6 were that 73% scored at or above the provincial standard in reading, 55% scored at or above the provincial standard in writing (with the remainder scoring at level 2), and 73% scored at or above the provincial standard in mathematics.

Why: These results are attributed to a focus on the use of differentiated instruction for students with special education needs, the use of a variety of assessment tools that were used to measure student achievement (i.e., CASI), the use of writing exemplars, and a focus on particular learning skills each reporting term.

Results: A school system success story: 310 students in 53 elementary schools used **assistive technology** to write EQAO provincial assessments and 35 out of 53 elementary schools were CODE pilot schools last year. This statistic alone speaks to a marked increase in the number of students with special education needs that can now access the Grade 6 provincial assessment. These students were often exempt in Grade 3 and would have been exempted from writing the Grade 6 assessment had it not been for the assistive technology and literacy pathway. 142 students in 13 high schools used **assistive technology** to write the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT); 66% passed the 2006-07 OSSLT, 59% passed the 2005-06 OSSLT; and the OSSLT deferral/exemption rate was less than 1% for both years.

Why: The use of assistive technology is helping students with special education needs demonstrate their knowledge and their access to the Ontario curriculum.

Much of the success with **assistive technology** and student success can be attributed to the Provincial Symposium *Tools for Learning: Effective Practices for the Use of Assistive Technology for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 12* that was held by the Ministry of Education in September 2006. One key result of this conference was in assisting school boards in developing school wide plans on the implementation and use of assistive technology accommodations to support students with special education needs.

Each school board has unique success stories with evidence on the improvement in student learning and achievement for students with special education needs. The focus of work in the projects in 2007 – 08 is to dig deeper in order to close the gap in student achievement for students with special education needs. A second focus is to facilitate system-wide knowledge mobilization of the lessons learned in the previous two years of the projects.

A further challenge for the projects in 2007 -08 is to understand data and its ability to inform effective practices across the sector. Key questions for the work and the research direction in the 2007 – 08 projects are:

- What have we learned from the data collected in various projects and reviews?
- How are we mobilizing knowledge to change our practices at the school and system levels?
- How are these practices similar or different to the other Ministry of Education strategies used with success (i.e., Lighthouse Projects, OFIP Schools, Turnaround Schools, Boys' Literacy Inquiry Projects)?
- How are we demonstrating success for our students with Special Education Needs and better targeting funding in the future?

The Ministry of Education and a CODE Leadership Team continue to monitor the progress of this project.

Student Assessment Project - The Ontario Psychological Association

In 2006, the Ministry of Education provided \$20 million to the Ontario Psychological Association (OPA) to work in partnership with school boards to reduce current wait times for students who require assessments and to enhance the capacity of teachers to provide effective programs for students. The focus of the project is on students in JK to Grade 4 who require differentiated learning experiences as a result of significant learning or behavioural needs. School boards determined their professional assessment needs that may include: psychological, speech language and occupational therapy.

School boards submitted Assessment Capacity Building Plans approved by an OPA monitoring team that coaches/mentors each of the school board's progress for the duration of the project. To date, the project has been successful in reducing wait times for students in Junior Kindergarten to Grade 4 who require professional assessments and in enhancing teacher capacity to provide effective programming for students with professional assessments resulting in improved literacy and numeracy achievement for students. School boards received Key Result Area templates in year two of the project. Progress in the projects is being monitored by the Ministry of Education and qualitative and quantitative results will be shared back to the ministry before the end of 2008.

A Promising Practices Guide is being produced in year two of the project by the OPA and will be shared with all of the school boards to foster sustainability and knowledge mobilization.

3). Reinforcing the connection between the Individual Education Plan (IEP) the Ontario Curriculum and the Provincial Report Card

The Ministry of Education introduced a province wide IEP collaborative review as a strategy to reinforce the connection between the Individual Education Plan (IEP), the Ontario curriculum and the Provincial Report Card.

Individual Education Plan (IEP) Collaborative Review

The ministry's Individual Education Plan Collaborative Review is addressing a series of relevant recommendations related to the measurability and reporting of student achievement made by the *Working Table on Special Education* (May 2006).

This is a foundational strategy in the ministry's goal to close the gap in student achievement. School board IEPs have been reviewed by school board staff and parents through a collaborative process led by the ministry. Each school board received an individual report, which provided feedback on the IEP packages they submitted, as well as a report on provincial trends. The ministry also made available a web-based voluntary IEP template for use by all district school boards in order to build greater consistency in IEP development and implementation across the province.

The whole IEP is about assessment and evaluation and is part of our broader focus on improving assessment and evaluation for all students, and providing professional development supports in this area. As a first step in this process, the Ministry of Education recently held a provincial symposium on *Assessment and Evaluation, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. A working document, *Growing Success, Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting: Improving Student Learning* was released at the conference. Our continued work is to enhance effective and consistent assessment, evaluation and reporting practices in schools and across school boards, and in particular with respect to students with special education needs.

4). More cooperative connections and better communication among schools, other sectors and families of students facing learning challenges; promoting a positive environment through minimizing conflict

Following recommendations made by the *Working Table*, a resource guide has been released and a formal dispute resolution pilot has been established.

Informal and Formal Dispute Resolution

The ministry-developed resource guide *Shared Solutions: A Guide to Preventing and Resolving Conflicts Regarding Programs and Services for Students with Special Education Needs* was released in October 2007 after extensive consultation with stakeholders. To support the release of the guide, professional development sessions

were held throughout the province. Educators, administrators, school board Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) members and representatives from the Parent Involvement School Board Committees, as well as representatives from community agencies, attended the professional development sessions. The guide offers advice and guidance on conflict prevention and resolution techniques for use in classrooms and schools for parents, educators and students.

The ministry is piloting a formal dispute resolution process in six selected school boards (4 English and 2 French) over the period from 2007 – 2009. To assist with the development of the pilots, the ministry is engaging a provincial advisory committee and has commissioned the services of an external evaluator to assess the success of the projects. A provincial policy on formal dispute resolution will be developed following the final evaluation of the pilots.

5). Improved balance between a focus on teaching and learning, and the need for appropriate process, documentation and accountability

In order to ensure an improved balance in processes, the Ministry of Education has provided direction to school boards with respect to their IPRC practices, while at the same time working internally to align reporting plans to the ministry.

Identification, Placement and Review Committees

The ministry has requested that all school boards examine their IPRC practices when both the board and the parent agree that the student's placement will be in the regular classroom. The ministry continues to expect that IPRCs will be held when parents request them, or when a self-contained or partially integrated placement is the likely destination for the student.

The ministry's intent is to ensure that administrative processes used by boards are actually leading to improved outcomes for students. It also wants to ensure that these processes are not acting as barriers for students to receive timely and effective special education programs and services.

School Board Improvement Plans

Over the 2007 – 08 school year, the ministry is working to align school board improvement planning processes beginning with other reporting plans (Literacy and Numeracy Annual Improvement Plans, K to Grade 6 and the Student Success Annual Action Plans, Grades 7-12). At the same time, the ministry is conducting a process to determine appropriate measures of achievement and learning for all students with special education needs. All processes include stakeholder involvement. During the 2008-09 school year, the ministry will work to align the special education plan with the revised Literacy and Numeracy and Student Success plans, with the intent to have aligned board improvement plans in place for the 2009-10 school year.

Funding Model for Special Education

The government of Ontario has committed to the evolution of special education funding which focuses more on improving student outcomes and less on the identification of students with high education needs. This is consistent with the recommendations by the *Working Table on Special Education* presented to the ministry for the 2006-07 school year. Another *Working Table* recommendation, which has been supported by the ministry, was to continue to allocate funding to boards based on the current model while studying ways to identify high needs without a student-based claims process.

As a corollary, the Provincial Auditor has noted that the ministry needs to have better procedures in place to ensure that school boards provide comparable and reliable information about their special education expenditures in order to facilitate meaningful analysis and support funding decisions that are related to the provision of special education programs and services.

Current Funding Model – Grants for Student Needs (GSN)

The present system of funding elementary and secondary education in Ontario - Grants for Student Needs (GSN) - was introduced in 1998, at the same time as a new school board governance structure was implemented.

The new school board governance structure involved a significant amalgamation of English-language school boards and the establishment of French-language school boards into the current 72 district school boards in Ontario (31 English-language public boards, 29 English-language Catholic boards, 4 French-language public boards, and 8 French-language Catholic boards).

Before 1998, school boards would set local education property tax rates, and municipalities would collect the taxes on boards' behalf. Under the present system, the government sets a uniform rate, based on a current-value assessment system, for the education portion of property taxes for all residential properties in the province, and it sets a rate that varies by municipality for the education portion of business property taxes. The Ministry of Education, using the GSN, determines each board's overall allocation. Property tax revenues (residential and business) are considered to form part of the allocation, and the Province provides additional funding up to the level set by the funding formula.

The GSN provides annual operating and capital funding to the 72 boards, allocated on the basis of a Pupil Foundation Grant, a School Foundation Grant, a number of Special Purpose Grants (one of which is the Special Education Grant) and a Pupil Accommodation Grant. For the 2007-08 school year, GSN funding is projected to reach \$18.45B.

The Special Education Grant (SEG) is incremental to the rest of the GSN and is provided in a protected envelope, meaning that allocations arising from the Special Education Grant can only be spent on special education programs, services and equipment. Boards are required to spend the full amount of their SEG allocation on special education for pupils of the board. If a board's net expenditure on special education for its pupils is less than its special education allocation, the board is required to place the remaining funds in a special education reserve fund.

The Special Education Grant is made up of five components - the Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA), the High Needs Amount (HNA), the Special Equipment Amount (SEA), the Special Incidence Portion (SIP), and the Facilities Amount (FA). For the 2007-08 school year, the SEG is projected to reach \$2.07B (or 11% of total GSN).

1. ***Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA)*** is allocated to boards on the basis of total enrolment.
2. ***High Needs Amount (HNA)*** addresses the cost of providing the intensive staff support required by the small number of pupils with high needs.

Funding from SEPPA and the HNA is not allocated to specific students nor used on a strict student-by-student basis. Together, SEPPA and HNA allocate approximately 93% of the SEG.

3. ***Special Equipment Amount (SEA)*** covers the cost of an individual student's equipment needs (and training, warranties and service of that equipment) in excess of \$800 per claim.
4. ***Special Incidence Portion (SIP)*** supports individual pupils with exceptionally high needs who require more than two full-time staff to address health and safety needs.
5. ***Facilities Amount (FA)*** provides funding for educational programs for students who are in facilities such as mental health residences, or youth custody facilities.

In addition to GSN funding, the ministry also provides program funding to school boards for specific initiatives through Education Programs Other (EPO) funding and other investments.

Further, through corporate funding, the ministry supports children with special education needs who attend:

- provincial and/or demonstration schools (for the visually impaired, deaf, deaf/blind, and/or other multiple exceptionalities); and
- school authorities which are small and/or isolated schools and/or schools in hospital settings.

Previous High Needs Funding Model (ISA 2/3) and Reasons for Termination

The funding for Intensive Support Amount (ISA) Levels 2 and 3 for students with high education needs was introduced in 1998 as part of the Special Education Grant. ISA 2/3 provided boards with funding to meet the cost of intensive support in the classroom required by the small number of pupils with very high needs. Eligible ISA Level 2 files were to be funded at \$12,000 per file, and eligible ISA Level 3 at \$27,000 per file.

To begin the 1998-99 school year boards were funded at a preliminary ISA 2/3 allocation. For each of 1998-99, 1999-2000, and 2000-01 boards received ISA 2/3 funding on the higher of their preliminary allocation or the projected results of a sample of claims reviewed according to eligibility criteria (a process known as "stable funding"). Some boards, for a variety of reasons, did not participate in submitting claims.

The eligibility criteria were pilot tested through this process and ultimately, seven ISA 2/3 profiles were refined and published in the *ISA Guidelines for 2001-02: Addendum*. The seven profiles did not align directly with the ministry's exceptionalities.

Using these seven profiles, the ministry initiated the ISA Comprehensive Review to be conducted over two school years, 2001-02 and 2002-03, in four cycles (cycles 1, 2 and 3 would occur in the 2001-02 school year and cycle 4 in the 2002-03 school year).

The government committed that for the 2003-04 school year, boards would receive "live" funding based on the final results of the Comprehensive Review (directly related to the number of ISA 2/3 claims validated by special education experts according to the published eligibility criteria by the end of cycle 4).

The ministry contracted with special education experts to validate documentation provided by boards in support of ISA 2/3 claims for funding, which included:

- Evidence of diagnosis and documented assessment results;
- Evidence of related difficulties;
- Evidence of needs and programming as indicated in the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP);
- Evidence of intensive support required;
- Full legal name;
- Birth date (day/month/year);
- Sex of the student;
- ISA ID number;
- Placement setting, elementary or secondary panel, and school number.

Knowing there would be four cycles, boards used various strategies to prepare and submit claims: some organized their efforts by profile; others started with a small sample to ensure they understood the criteria; some planned to submit in the later cycles needing time to organize administratively and/or because they needed additional support to

conduct assessments (which were part of the criteria). By the end of cycle 3, an additional \$10M was announced for 2002-03 to support assessments in time for cycle 4.

In 2002, the ministry received the *Report of the Education Equality Task Force (EETF)*, led by Dr. Mordechai Rozanski. In December 2002, in response to the recommendations of the EETF the ministry announced \$250M in additional funding for special education, based on the early results of the ISA comprehensive review – initially providing an in-year additional ISA 2/3 funding of \$130M for the 2002-03 school year.

In May 2003, boards received their final baseline list of cycle 4 files eligible for funding in the 2002-03 school year, and the resulting final allocations for ISA 2/3. Data from the comprehensive review was available at the student level, regional level, and board level, with the flexibility to generate reports by profile, level, gender and age.

In October 2003, the government changed when the Liberals were elected to power. A fifth cycle had already been announced, to be conducted in 2003-04 to ensure all boards had equal opportunity to submit all eligible claims. Funding for the 2003-04 school year was based on the composite results of cycles 1-5 (the number of eligible claims of students enrolled as of October 31, 2003). At the end of cycle 5, school boards were eligible for an in-year increase in 2003-04 of approximately \$100M more than the allocation identified in boards' June 2003 Estimates.

The ISA Comprehensive Review resulted in an escalation of high needs funding by 64%, from \$565M in 2001-02 to \$926M by 2003-04, and the ministry stopped the process.

The range of prevalence¹⁴ among boards at the conclusion of cycle 4 (2002-03 results) was from 1.24% to 6.54% and the range of prevalence at the conclusion of cycle 5 (2003-04 results) was from 1.69% to 9.51%. Throughout the period described there was no financial incentive to report students as receiving special education programs and services and board behaviour is variable.

While boards had developed the administrative capacity to prepare and submit claims, the ministry had become concerned the ISA 2/3 funding was providing an incentive for boards to focus on providing staff supports (primarily educational assistants) and to conduct assessments in support of the ISA 2/3 process. However, there appears to be no direct evidence to demonstrate that this direct support and investment translated into improved educational outcomes for students.

While the ISA 2/3 funding component was intended to establish each board's base prevalence rate of students with very high needs and to establish a related funding allocation mechanism, it was easily confused with service levels for specific students who met specific eligibility criteria. ISA funding claims for individual students were generated by school boards to demonstrate their relative need for funding for students

¹⁴ Prevalence is the total number of high needs students in a given time period, incidence is the number of new or "in-coming".

with very high needs, but the funding was not tied to the individual student. This has been a point of great frustration and confusion for parents and some school board staff.

Some individual parents, parent associations and educators expressed concern that the ISA 2/3 funding approach tended to “medicalize” special education with an over-emphasis and reliance on formal diagnoses, and a focus on services designed to manage symptoms rather than improve student achievement. Some parents complained that the documentation needed to support an ISA 2/3 claim tended to be negative and deficit-oriented. Some even suggested that there was a disincentive for schools to document student improvement as it could jeopardize potential funding eligibility on the part of an individual student.

Research indicates that needs-based funding systems tend to increase the number of students receiving special education programs and services. It became evident that the government could not sustain the growth in the number of eligible files for students with high needs.

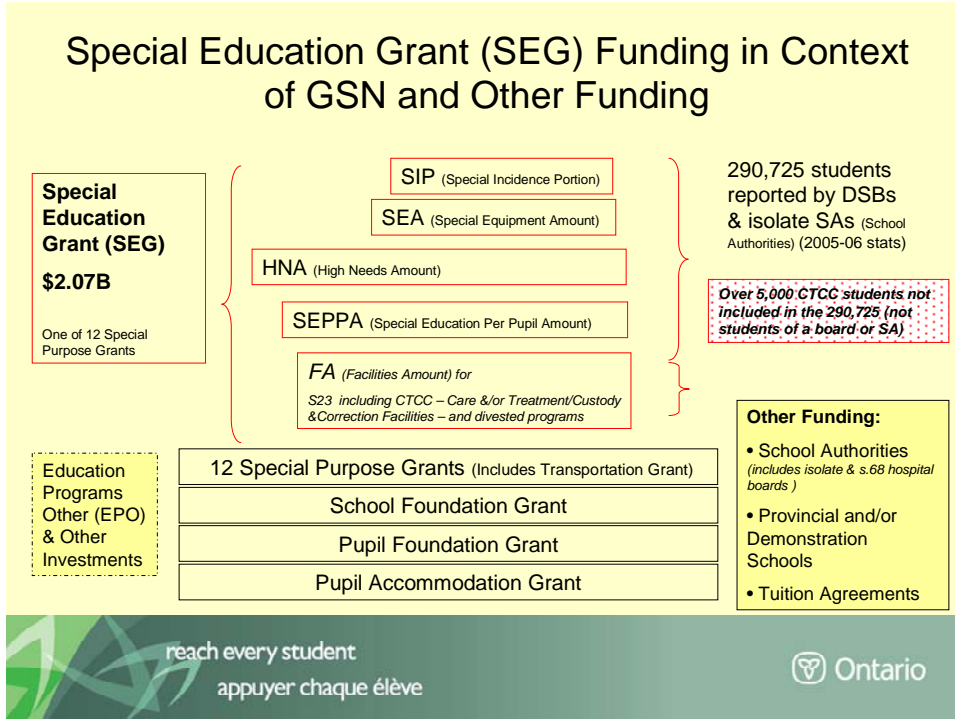
In Ontario, school boards have always had the flexibility to choose how to provide special education programs and services. Some Ontario stakeholders claimed that the ISA 2/3 funding approach discouraged school boards from providing programs and services to those exceptionality groups that generated little or no additional funding (e.g. there was no ISA 2/3 profile for gifted students).

For 2004-05, the ministry required boards to report on the change in numbers of high needs students (called Net New Needs), and funded boards at a reduced rate of \$17,000 per net new claim. Further, this funding was adjusted by new special education expenditure reporting rules regarding the amount of protected special education funding boards could retain in their special education reserves. A similar process occurred for 2005-06.

For the 2006-07 school year the Net New Needs funding was converted into a board-specific High Needs Amount which was multiplied by the board’s total average daily enrolment (ADE), including the ADE of high needs students. Boards were not required to participate in a claims process for high needs students.

For 2007-08, there was no claims process; the previous year’s board-specific per-pupil High Needs Amount was multiplied by the current year ADE to determine the HNA funding. In response to school board concerns, a High Needs Amount stabilization approach was introduced in 2007-08 such that no board received less HNA funding in 2007-08 than it received in 2006-07.

For a detailed schematic description of the **Special Education Grant (SEG) Funding in Context of the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) and Other Funding** please see the following chart. Any new policy framework needs to take into consideration the degree to which this grant should remain protected and for what population of students.



Analysis

While special education funding has been increasing, overall provincial enrolment has been declining.

The following chart illustrates that, over an eight-year period, as Ontario student enrolment remained stable, the board reports of students with special education needs continued to rise, as did the number of teacher assistants supporting students with special education needs.

Comparison of Student Enrolment to Teacher Assistant Support

Year	Total Student Enrolment	Students Receiving Special Education Programs and Services as reported by boards	Number of Teaching Assistants supporting Students With Special Education Needs
98/99	2,108,683	262,632	12,542
99/00	2,128,783	267,259	13,312
00/01	2,140,793	269,584	15,078
01/02	2,160,538	276,552	15,320
02/03	2,162,294	269,251	16,535
03/04	2,127,172	275,566	18,012
04/05	2,121,338	290,005	19,961
05/06	2,116,073	290,725	21,122
%change	0.03% increase	10.79% increase	68.4% increase

Another trend in special education is the consistent growth in the SIP (individual claim based funding for highest needs students for health and/or safety needs) and the growth in SEA (individual and group claims for special equipment) allocations. The number of claims and the number of boards making claims have grown year over year (while all boards are presently accessing SEA funding, there are still more than 20 boards not applying for SIP funding). The provincial allocation for SIP and SEA are shown in the table below.

SIP & SEA Historical Allocations

in millions (\$M)

	98/99	99/00	00/01	01/02	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08
SEA	3.80	3.50	5.60	7.50	11.80	19.20	22.10	29.30	41.30	54.80
SIP	-	0.60	0.90	2.30	4.40	7.50	10.90	13.60	21.10	31.50
<i>Projections</i>										

As you can see, SIP and SEA allocations have increased dramatically from 1998-99 onwards. There may be a number of reasons for this. One interpretation would be that boards focus their efforts on those areas which generate additional special education funding, and thus with the end of ISA 2/3 turned their attention to SIP and SEA. Another interpretation would be to consider the increased number, needs and complexity of students, the higher costs, and the growing expectations for equipment and services, etc. The truth is likely somewhere in between. This does demonstrate how funding adjustments can change behaviour. Further investigation of these changes needs to take place.

Future Special Education Funding Direction

As the ministry moves forward with the review of the funding model for special education, it is mindful of a number of key pressures and issues that include:

- Ministry goals of achievement, closing the gap and public confidence and their impact on special education;
- Ministry's expectation that boards will support and need resources to implement *Education for All* extended to graduation, assistive technology, dispute resolution, improved IEPs, alternative achievement measures and collaborative services;
- Board reports of increased number, complexity and cost of special education services despite overall decline in provincial enrolment;
- Need to improve accountability for student achievement results, including students with special education needs;
- Need to target support for underperforming school boards and schools;
- Need for funding model to be responsive to need, and be predictable, sustainable and support a focus on outcomes;
- Maintain board flexibility to determine local programs and services based on student needs and strengths (not driven by funding);
- Need for an evolutionary process to ensure stability during transition.

The ministry focus is on moving forward to support good programming for students with special education needs, and IEPs for these students that are linked to assessment, curriculum and program. The ministry will also continue to focus on sharing effective practices and increasing team training prior to larger investments in funding.

As it relates to funding, the ministry will continue to review and refine the various components of SEG in the context of total GSN and other funding investments. In addition, the ministry will continue to consult with stakeholders to ensure that the evolution of the special education funding approach supports students with special education needs and improves student outcomes.

Ongoing Pressures and Issues

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

Program There is a growing base of research about evidence-based effective instructional strategies for closing the achievement gap for students with special education needs; however, this information needs to move beyond the stages of knowledge awareness and knowledge utilization towards knowledge transfer and knowledge mobilization. One of our challenges is to find ways to support knowledge mobilization between schools and school districts.

Ontario regulations currently favour regular classroom placement for students with special education needs; however, there is a need to define inclusion and evaluate effective practices in various placement settings. Only then will we have the necessary data and information to confirm one placement setting over another.

Our existing measures for defining student outcomes are limited and inadequate. There is a need to go beyond academic measures and to explore what alternative demonstrations of achievement could be used to measure student achievement. Our pilot project on the development of resources and a provincial skills certificate is a first step in this process.

Whole Child Development This discussion needs to encompass both the child and youth development needs that are both educational and non-educational. Canadian and American research confirms a growing trend towards school-based collaboration/coordination models. This includes the provision of needed health and mental health services. School is the universally accessible environment for all children and thus is an important venue for service delivery. There is a lack of a provincial program and financial framework to address children's mental health, speech and language services, health services (e.g., intramuscular injections and use of defibrillators).

Stakeholder Management There will continue to be varying perspectives and priorities with respect to the designation of exceptionalities, the placement of students with respect to special education programs and services and the funding that is available to support the broad needs of a varied student population. There will continue to be times when there are political tensions to serve a particular sector of high needs students and like other priorities, these will need to be taken into consideration.

Accountability: Value for Money The ministry has implemented a number of accountability reforms with respect to special education programs and services. One is the Program and Financial Review of School Boards, and the second is the IEP Collaborative Review. This year, the Provincial Auditor is reviewing special education programs and services in the largest school board in the province and has the intention to review additional school boards.

Where we are going next ...

The Ontario publicly funded education system has evolved to recognize students with special education and their rights to special education programs and services. As a ministry, we are taking stock of our progress, building on the current areas of focused strategic attention and moving forward with greater precision. Our focus must continue to be to support improved outcomes for students with special education needs.

The ministry recognizes that we are collectively making progress in our student achievement agenda but that we still have a considerable way to go to achieve our goals. There have been small measures of improvement in student achievement for students with special education needs (more particularly within the French-language schools); however, there has been little closing of the gap in student achievement for this group of students.

Recognizing that our strategies are working and the spirit of enthusiasm around our goals is high, our focus in 2007 – 08 is to build on this momentum by focusing our energies on closing the gap in student achievement for these students. Over this year we are:

- ✓ targeting to improve student achievement by providing more pedagogical support for our teachers including differentiated instruction, assessment and team training;
- ✓ supporting instructional leadership and effective management skills to strengthen a positive culture that supports improvements in the learning environment;
- ✓ enhancing system capacity to analyze and use data to identify and support effective instructional practices;
- ✓ having more precise and effective strategies in special education to support improved student outcomes; and
- ✓ continuing to work on a new approach to special education funding.

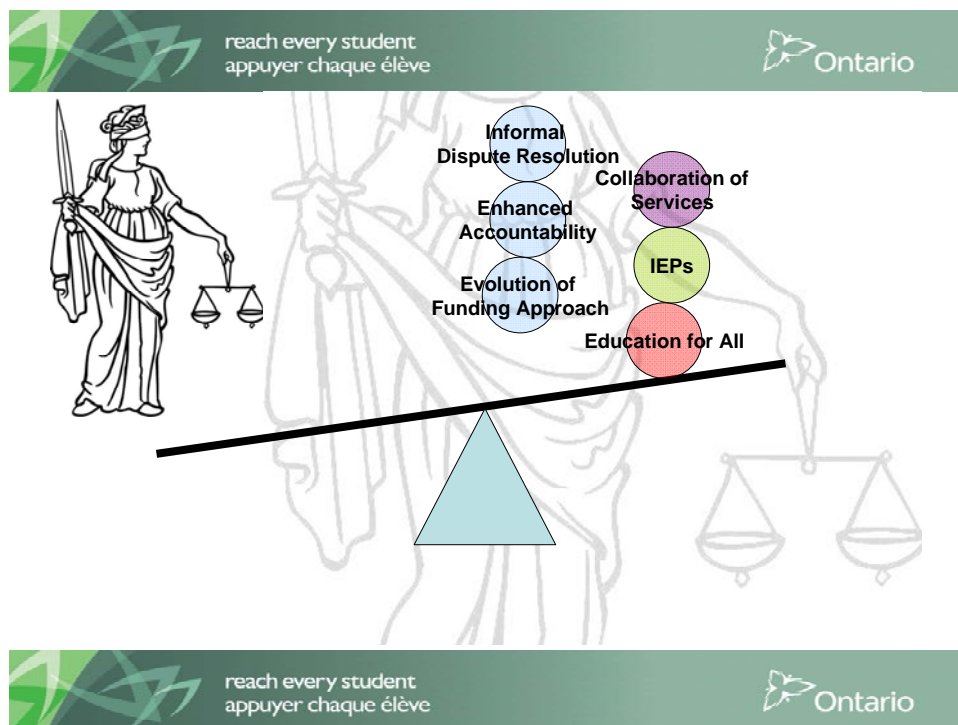
We recognize that there is also a need to determine broader measures of success beyond our current measures of achievement (i.e., provincial assessments, assessment and evaluation policies and achievement on the Ontario provincial report card) and there is a

need to collect more focused data and to improve our measures for evaluating outcomes for students with special education needs.

Special education programs and services are complex and multi-faceted and the clarity of our communications around our policies with educators, parents and students is also part of our focus. In an effort to build public confidence in public education, the Parent Engagement Office of the Ministry of Education is a key partner in our ongoing work.

With respect to the issue of professional practice, we recognize the need to train administrators, teachers and education assistants to better meet the needs of students with special education needs. As a ministry, we are funding professional development activities that clearly have an impact on improving student outcomes for special education needs. There is a paradigm shift in our schools with respect to how special education programs and services are delivered on the ground level, whereby it is team delivery working collaboratively to deliver improved results in student achievement. We are continuing to support a team approach in all of our ongoing professional development work.

The following chart provides an overview of our current and ongoing work in special education.



We recognize the need for collaboration at the interministerial levels. In that vein, Cabinet Office is leading an initiative to try and address the needs of the child as a whole. Cabinet Office will be looking to bring together the Ministries of Education, Children and Youth Services, Community and Social Services in a collaborative model.

Thanks to the efforts of all our partners, our strategies to improve student achievement and raise the graduation rates are working. Graduation rates have risen from 68% to 75% over the past three years and credit accumulation rates continue to rise. In comparing the 2006-07 assessment results with the 2002-03 results, all assessment areas have improved, with remarkable gains, and there are some positive results in closing gaps in performance. Our population of students with special education needs has shown improvements in most assessments and the gender gap is also closing in some assessments.

We celebrate the progress that has been made for our students with special education needs and we recognize the support of Ontario educators in this process as we continue to move forward with our gap-closing strategies.

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Useful Links

Shared Solutions – A Guide for Preventing and Resolving Conflicts Regarding Programs and Services for Students with Special Education Needs (2007)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/shared.html>

Special Education Transformation Report (2006)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/speced/transformation/>

Education for All: Expert Panel Report (2005)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/speced/panel/index.html>

The Individual Education Plan: Resource Guide (2004)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/guide/resource/iepresguid.pdf>

Special Education Companion to the Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner

<http://www.ocup.org> (2002)

Special Education Advisory Committee Information Program

<http://seac-learning.ca>

Ontario Ministry of Education Website, Special Education

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/speced.html>