

Education Equality Task Force

Response from the Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders

September 23, 2002

Background:

The Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders (OAFCCD) was founded in 1994 by families and professionals concerned about the lack of understanding about the needs of children with speech and language disorders.

The ability to communicate is one of the defining characteristics of humans. The ability to communicate effectively is an essential skill in modern society. Children who have communication impairments are at a disadvantage in every way, including their ability to be educated, to be involved in community activities, and to participate in society.

Communication disorders, which includes speech and language disorders, are the largest disabling conditions in society affecting 5-10% of the general population,. Speech disorders may involve saying sounds incorrectly, stuttering or voice difficulties. Language disorders involve difficulties in understanding and expressing thoughts in correct sentences. Children with speech and/or language impairments will often have difficulty learning to read and write.

Professional intervention can make a big difference. Students who get help are more likely to feel better about themselves, get along well with others, be more independent, read better, stay in school, and be employed. Without help, children are more likely to develop behaviour problems, be in trouble with the law, end up on welfare, and have poor relationships with others.

Quality of Student Learning and Achievement

1. What core programs and services are essential to your definition of a quality education?

The goal of a quality education is to nurture and support children as they grow and develop into participating members of society. Elements of a quality education include:

- Solid curriculum linked to the development levels of students
- Special education services and programs
- English as a Second Language programs
- Transportation for students who live distant from schools
- Preparation for citizenship and civic involvement
- Preparation for further education and employment
- Knowledge and skills related to healthy living
- Exposure to music, arts and theatre
- Knowledge and understanding of natural environment

2. How effective is the current funding approach in providing appropriate and stable

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support to these programs and services including personnel costs, transportation, English as a Second Language, special education and continuing education, among others? In other words, does per pupil funding reflect the cost of per pupil programs and services needed to achieve a quality educational experience?

The current funding approach is inadequate because cost pressures in certain envelopes (especially teacher salaries, transportation and special education) forces the boards to underspend in other areas (classroom supplies, computers, maintenance). Most importantly the model is based on 1997 salary levels and costs, and has not been designed to reflect inflation, increased utility and fuel costs, increased benefit costs, or salary adjustments. In addition, the late announcement of annual funding levels has hindered adequate budget planning and preparation.

The difference between the current funding model and board expenditure is very close with potential deficits representing less than 5% of revenue. However, it is not easy to say whether the per pupil funding is adequate because the relationship between needs, costs and outcomes is complex. The funding formula should at least ensure that boards have sufficient funds to provide all the key elements.

In the current funding model the per pupil amount of SEPPA for secondary students is less than that for elementary students. Secondary school students continue to have special education needs which must be addressed. In particular, students with life long disabilities, such as a language disorder, will need significant extra support as they prepare to move from school to community. Students with special education needs require significant support and preparation for maintaining social relationships, living in the community, finding and keeping jobs, or entering post secondary education.

3. Should boards have some access to local revenue, in an equitable fashion, to deal with discretionary programs and services beyond the education programs and services covered by student-focused funding?

The discussion must start with a definition of discretionary programs. Boards have developed a variety of delivery models for core activities such as special education, English as Second Language, Preschool and family support, physical education, outdoor education etc. and these should all be considered legitimate delivery options. They are not discretionary programs.

Historically boards have had a great deal of autonomy in developing programs and services and schools are key components of the social fabric of a community. On site child care facilities, community libraries and recreation facilities benefit the wider community as well as the school population. Where the funding formula threatens the termination or reduction of these valuable programs, there needs to be a mechanism to get community funding. Whether this is through local revenue, or provincial grants is not as important.

Equity and Fairness

4. How effective is the funding mechanism in responding to different needs of students and different needs of school boards in urban, northern and rural areas, among small and large

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urban boards and among public, Catholic, French and English language school boards?**

The funding mechanism seems to be failing various boards for a variety of reasons. The large urban boards have severe pressures created by the multi-cultural and socio-economic status of the families they serve. Large rural and northern boards have extra expenses related to the dispersed nature of the population, and the limited availability of community services and professional expertise. It would seem that a model which groups similar boards and provides funding based on their unique needs may help.

5. Are there differences among school board costs which require funding to be more responsive?

School board funding can't be looked at in isolation from community needs and resources. Participation in schools is required by law and universally available to all children. As a result it may make sense to organize and deliver supports to children and families through schools. If this approach makes sense to the community, there should be a mechanism to access resources to fund the activities. The additional resources could be either locally or provincially administered. It is very important that we recognize that schools and education services are part of the range of publicly funded services that Ontarions want, and they are not a separate entity.

Responsiveness to Local Needs

Student Transportation:

6. What elements should be included in a new model?

Some students who require special education programs and services require specialized transportation (wheel chair accessibility, lower steps or ramps), or adult supervision and support or require to be transported to schools outside their neighbourhood. A new model for transportation should recognize these costs.

In developing a new model for transportation it may be more effective to plan towards an inclusive transportation system that uses fully accessible buses rather than continue to support a parallel transportation system. Achieving this vision may require a system of incentives to support the transitional costs.

7. Would incentives be appropriate and effective to encourage boards to form partnerships to deliver transportation services?

One of the barriers to shared transportation between co-terminus boards is the difference in board policy related to acceptable walking distances for students. The new model should articulate standard maximum walking distances in urban areas. The model should also identify maximum travel times for students on the buses.

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In urban areas, partnerships with public transportation systems should be encouraged. Incentives should benefit both the school board and the municipality that operates the public system.

Special Education:

8. How should the government assess boards' needs for funding to support special education programs and services?

Currently the board uses two grants, SEPPA and ISA. The experience of all boards would suggest that the current total of funds generated by the grants is still inadequate to provide the level of services and programs required. The system would be improved if the per pupil amount in SEPPA was increased and ISA abandoned as a grant based on individual students, except for ISA 1 the grant for equipment funding.. However, the data collected in the past few years through ISA claims could be used to create a weighting factor, where the incidence has been shown to be significantly higher than other boards. (I.e. If 2% is the provincial average, boards that have demonstrated more than 2% of their students are eligible to ISA should get extra funds.)

Determining what an adequate level of special education funding should be is very difficult. Boards have a great deal of autonomy in what services and programs they provide and the province needs to clarify the purpose of special education funding and develop a stronger link to student outcomes. One approach would be to base the grant on provincial program standards. The Ministry of Education has been working on provincial program standards for two years and this work should be completed. The information on the programs and services required by exceptional students, could then be used to develop expectations about what each board should be providing.

9. How can funding be distributed in a way that is both responsive to students' needs for services and is administratively efficient?

Historically boards developed their special education budgets based on student needs, and there needs to be a return to a needs based approach which reflects provincial program standards for service delivery. For example, the majority of special education students are in regular classrooms and as a result every school needs to have a teacher with special education training and experience. Funding for special education teachers could be based on the incidence of exceptional students and a recommended ratio of special education teachers to students. (For example, if the incidence of exceptional students is 10%, the preferred ratio might be 1 Special education Teacher to 250 students.) A similar approach could be used for support personnel and professional staff.

Note: OAFCCD has developed a position paper on this issue and recommends a minimum ratio of 1 Speech - Language Pathologist to 2250 students, and a preferred ratio of 1 Speech - Language Pathologist to 1500 students. OAFCCD support documents are attached.

10. What approach to special education funding would be effective in balancing

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demonstrated need and efficiency?**

This is an area where the development of provincial program standards is critical. The provincial standards developed for Individual Education Plans are helping in the development of improved planning for student programming. However, there are still major problems in ensuring that students get the services and programs they need. There needs to be a stronger link between the individual needs of students and the programs and services delivered by the school board.

In addition, to completing the development of provincial program standards, the education funding formula should ensure that boards have adequate funding to implement the provincial standards. It should be noted that implementation of change in systems as large as Ontario school boards takes a long time. Professional development and training is critical and boards need to have adequate funds for these activities.

The ISA 1 grant has been very effective in allowing boards to obtain required equipment for students and should be maintained.

In future a per pupil special education grant should be based on

- Provincial standards for program delivery
- Recommended ratios for special education teachers and professional staff
- A weighting factor for boards who have demonstrated a higher than average incidence of students who meet the criteria for ISA 2 and 3.
- Continuation of ISA1

School Renewal:

The area of school renewal is very contentious and the school boards Trustees have unfairly taken the blame for school closures and school overcrowding. A provincial formula approach has not been helpful in small rural communities, or crowded suburban portables. The issues of school closures and expansions is clearly a local issue and funding should be provided to allow local decision making, with provincial guidelines. The provincial guidelines should recognize community impact, urban and rural locations, as well as student enrollment trends.

11. Has the Grant for School Renewal effectively provided funding for repairs and renovations?

N/A

12. How frequently should the data for the School Renewal be updated?

N/A

13. Are the criteria currently included in the Pupil Accommodation Grant comprehensive enough to address issues of school repair and maintenance?

N/A

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14. How can new pupil places be dealt with in a fair and equitable manner?

N/A

Accountability

15. How effective are the current accountability parameters such as reporting requirements, legislative parameters, etc., in improving learning outcomes?

The Annual Special Education Plan is the part of the accountability process for special education and it has been totally ineffective. Boards are required to submit a Special Education Plan which documents the special education programs and services that will be provided in the following school year. Despite the development of provincial standards for Special Education Plans (released in 2000) which itemize the contents of the plan, there are no provincial program standards on what each school board should provide, and no process to determine if the board actually provides all the documented programs and services. As a result the boards spend time and resources developing a document that can't be compared between boards, or against provincial standards, or even considered against student outcomes.

As part of the accountability process Special Education Advisory Committees (SEAC) are involved in the annual review of the Special Education Plan. Unfortunately, when as the committee sees the plan and provides comments or concerns they can be disregarded by the Trustees and by the Ministry. The standard only requires that they see the plan, not that they agree with it or believe it can be implemented.

Similarly, the SEAC members are required to be provided information on the budget, but their concerns about the adequacy of funding to deliver the plan can be noted and then disregarded. The function of the committee is to provide advice but there is no requirement for their advice to be followed. As a result a great plan will be prepared but due to inadequate funding not implemented. Boards may appear to be offering an extensive range of programs and services but no one is accountable to make sure the plan is implemented and that student needs are met.

16. How effective are current funding envelope requirements at providing appropriate support to specific programs and services?

Foundation Grant:

Annual inflation, actual teacher salary levels and increased benefit costs have not been adequately factored in the grant.

The Professional and para-professional line has been used as a catch-all for a variety of school personnel. The category was based on a particular ratio of professionals per 1000 students and an average salary level. This is an unrealistic approach given the variety of personnel funded through the category.

Transportation Grant:

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The grant levels have not been adjusted to reflect increased fuel prices and other operating costs. The funding levels have not been revised since board amalgamation and do not recognize the extra costs related to the needs of special education students.

Special Education Grants:

SEPPA grants have been inadequate to meet the needs and most boards have overspent on this category.

ISA 1 Grants have been effective in getting additional funds for equipment and personnel.

ISA2 and ISA 3 have had a very negative impact on the system. Changing criteria and significant administrative burden have resulted in less special education services for students. It has also created a perception that only students who meet the ISA criteria or profiles are eligible for special education programs and services. This grant should be eliminated.

17. Should the government give boards the flexibility to remove or restructure expenditure envelopes?

Certain expenditure envelopes have proved to be inadequate and it is more important that the formulas are revised to ensure adequate funding. If envelopes are adequate there will be less need for boards to have flexibility between envelopes.

18. Should the Local Priorities Amount (introduced in 2001-02) be expanded to give boards increased flexibility to provide for local discretionary programs?

See above discussion about discretionary programs.

19. Are there other changes that should be considered to provide boards with a more appropriate level of flexibility?

It is important that schools and school boards not be considered independent of the community and other publicly funded services. In many cases the “discretionary” programs are community services that should be maintained. Funding could be available for these community services to be maintained from a **community partnership fund** that is available to school boards and other government funded agencies.

20. If the government provided boards with multi-year funding, would that give boards greater flexibility and improve their planning processes?

Boards need to make long term plans and multi-year funding would help. There also needs to be a mechanism to help boards cope with fluctuations in student enrollment.

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Affordability**

21. What is the best approach to recognize increased costs, while continuing to give boards incentives to use resources efficiently?

The greatest expenditure category is salaries and there may need to be provincial salary guidelines and recognition for at least annual cost of living increases.

22. Student-focused funding determines each board's allocation without regard to the source of revenue. Should this approach be maintained, or should boards have access to other sources of revenue to increase their flexibility?

See above discussion of community partnership funds.

23. How can cost benchmarks be kept updated?

Grants should all be increased annually to reflect provincial inflation and cost of living increases.

Provincial salary grids or guidelines, should be reviewed on a regular basis, for example every three or five years.

24. How can stability in funding be sustained to assist planning?

N/A

25. Are there alternative approaches to bargaining that would achieve fairness while promoting greater stability and improved budgeting?

Salary levels have been harmonized to some extent over the past few years as a result of the funding formula. Any new bargaining system would need to recognize the various challenges related to the different types of boards. As discussed earlier there may need to be a tiered funding model with different salary levels recognized in each tier (large urban, small northern or rural, etc.)

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