

PROMISES UNFULFILLED

Addressing the Special Education Crisis in Ontario

Executive Summary



Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario Equity Statement

It is the goal of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario to work with others to create schools, communities, and a society free from all forms of individual and systemic discrimination. To further this goal, ETFO defines equity as fairness achieved through proactive measures, which results in equality, promotes diversity, and fosters respect and dignity for all.

ETFO's Equity Initiatives

ETFO is a union committed to social justice, equity, and inclusion. The Federation's commitment to these principles is reflected in the initiatives it has established as organizational priorities, such as: ETFO's multi-year strategy on anti-Black racism; two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning education; and addressing First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues. ETFO establishes its understanding of these issues within an anti-oppressive framework. The Federation ensures its work incorporates the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, addresses individual and systemic inequities, and supports ETFO members as they strive for equity and social justice in their professional and personal lives. Using the anti-oppressive framework is one of the ways that ETFO is operationalizing its Equity Statement.

Definition of an Anti-Oppressive Framework

An anti-oppressive framework is the method and process in which we understand how systems of oppression such as colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism can result in individual discriminatory actions and structural/systemic inequalities for certain groups in society. Anti-oppressive practices and goals seek to recognize and dismantle such discriminatory actions and power imbalances. Anti-oppressive practices and this framework should seek to guide the Federation's work with an aim to identify strategies and solutions to deconstruct power and privilege in order to mitigate and address the systemic inequalities that often operate simultaneously and unconsciously at the individual, group, and institutional or union level.

ETFO Land Acknowledgment

In the Spirit of Truth and Reconciliation, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario acknowledges that we are gathered today on the customary and traditional lands of the Indigenous Peoples of this territory.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Special education is the recognized name for the educational processes responsible for the organizing, funding, and support of children with disabilities in Ontario schools and is inscribed in legislation and policy. It is important to note that **special education**, **special needs**, and **exceptionality** have been described as out of date, patronizing, and even discriminatory terms that create barriers for the education system to effectively serve all children. However, for the sake of clarity, the terms inscribed in legislation and policy are used throughout this report.

ETFO Human Rights Statement

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario is committed to:

- providing an environment for members that is free from harassment and discrimination at all provincial and local Federation sponsored activities;
- fostering the goodwill and trust necessary to protect the rights of all individuals within the organization;
- neither tolerating nor condoning behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of individuals or the integrity of relationships; and
- promoting mutual respect, understanding and co-operation as the basis of interaction among all members.

Harassment and discrimination on the basis of a prohibited ground are violations of the *Ontario Human Rights Code* and are illegal. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario will not tolerate any form of harassment or discrimination, as defined by the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, at provincial or local Federation sponsored activities.



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INTRODUCTION

All children deserve a high-quality education that recognizes their diverse needs and abilities. For decades, ETFO has advocated for Ontario's public education system to mandate and fully fund the supports and programs necessary to make this goal a reality for children with disabilities.

In 2002, ETFO released *Fulfilling the Promise: Ensuring Success for Students with Special Needs*, a position paper that summarized issues in special education caused by the policy and funding changes made by the Mike Harris Conservative government. Informed by input from classroom education workers, the paper included recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Education that would have supported the success of children with disabilities.

These recommendations were largely ignored and – 23 years later – the same issues in special education persist. In fact, they have worsened. *Promises Unfulfilled* serves as a renewed call to action to finally address the shortcomings of a failing system and ensure success for children with disabilities in Ontario.

The right of a child to an education that enables them to fulfil their potential is unconditional, and it is protected by law. However, ETFO recognizes that the practical implementation of special education is a complex web of history, policy, and funding that intersects with the diverse spectrum of student exceptionalities and learning needs within the classroom.

It is important to acknowledge that disability is an uncomfortable subject for many people. But we must face the biases and prejudices of our past and understand how they have manifested in today's special education policies and funding.

In recent years, ETFO commissioned Stratcom to conduct member surveys and focus groups on various topics to fully comprehend what is happening in Ontario classrooms. During the 2024 focus groups on special education, ETFO members identified the following challenges:

- Lack of early intervention
- No supports in the inclusion model
- Barriers to accessing programs
- Limited resources and support services
- Increasing school violence because of unmet student needs
- Lack of special education supports for English language learners
- Inequities for children with disabilities persist

The recommendations included in this report are based on research, statistics, expert analysis, and input from educators directly impacted by the current reality and complexities in our schools. They demand necessary change. Our students deserve better, and it is incumbent upon our governments and education systems to ensure that **all** children in Ontario are provided with every tool and opportunity to thrive.

“It comes down to money, and unfortunately this province and its leadership [is] going in the wrong direction – defunding education. It is not going to get better until politicians take education seriously. Politicians have done a very good job of making us out to be the bad guys, the greedy ones. This is a societal problem, how women are seen and treated in society. We are in a majority female profession. If this were a male-dominated profession, we would not be having this conversation. There would be funding.”

– Special Education Teacher , ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

“I have a class with 15 IEPs that all say preferential seating. Our hands are tied. It is impossible to succeed. It is so overwhelming to know that you are letting kids slip through.”

*– Regular Classroom Teacher,
2024 ETFO special education focus groups*

A LACK OF EARLY INTERVENTIONS

Experts in the field of special education continually advocate for children with disabilities to be given opportunities for early intervention in an inclusive school environment so they can prosper as adults. The Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read inquiry, which focused on early reading skills, found that Ontario's public education system lacked access to early learning interventions.

During the 2022-26 round of central collective bargaining, ETFO was concerned that the Ontario Ministry of Education was creating a false sense of accountability by arbitrarily selecting recommendations from the [Right to Read report](#) that required the least amount of investment. That is why ETFO bargained for an additional 401 early reading specialists to support early learners. Unfortunately, these supports are only in place until the current collective agreement expires on August 31, 2026.

“For most kids that have any reading difficulty, it’s just ‘Put them on Lexia for 20 minutes and they’ll be good.’ They are putting their trust in this one reading program to solve all of these kids’ problems. When I started teaching, EAs used to take students to the library or to a resource room and work with them in small groups to help guide and educate them.”

*– Regular Classroom Teacher,
2024 ETFO special
education focus groups*

NO SUPPORTS IN THE INCLUSION MODEL

The Ontario Ministry of Education's IPRC placement policy favours the inclusion of exceptional students in the regular classroom. It is in the practical application of this policy that tension surrounding inclusive models begins. How to implement inclusion within the current structure of public schooling has become a concern for Ontario teachers. Poor implementation is not an option that supports identified students.

That is why the inclusion model has been a priority for ETFO at the central bargaining table, resulting in the negotiated [Letter of Agreement #9](#) in the 2019-2022 teacher/occasional teacher collective agreement.

The letter created the Support for Students Committee, comprised of representatives from ETFO, Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA), and the Ministry of Education,

“The needs are not reflective of the provincial numbers. The provincial government thinks the rate of autism is one in 63. In one of my schools, the rate is one in 22; in another of my schools the rate is one in 14. The provincial government does not fund at that rate. We don't have specialized schools for kids to go to. For some children – grade 6, non-verbal, non-toilet-trained – their only option is a regular class placement.”

– DECE Member, ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey

which collaborated on *Supporting Children Toward Successful Integration*, a document that was shared with district school boards in 2021. As a result of the 2022-26 central collective agreement, the report was re-issued in January 2024.

To bring *Supporting Children Toward Successful Integration* to life, in the fall of 2024, ETFO and OPSBA began to compile a list of evidence-based and research-informed practices, including resources, which have been scaled in district school boards across the province to support success for children with disabilities both academically and socially during periods of inclusion. The process

of determining best practices remains ongoing and challenging because of the variability of both learners and of special education supports that exist across the province.

Lower class sizes are essential to the inclusion model. Unfortunately, according to researchers from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario has lost 5,000 classroom educators since 2018. An analysis of the technical papers that provide the number of classroom educators per 1,000 children reveals that there are 1,600 fewer Kindergarten educators and 1,000 fewer teachers in grades 4 to 8 as of the 2024-25 school year.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING PROGRAMS

Access to appropriate placements has been a debate for almost a century. In *A Class By Themselves?*, Jason Ellis describes how, in 1922, the Toronto board of education began a program for deaf children that used pure oralism, a method that taught lip-reading and speech, while prohibiting deaf children from signing. Plans for even more oralism in the city's schools were opposed by the Ontario Association of the Deaf (OAD), which argued that the board was attempting to suppress sign language and the unique Deaf culture it nurtured.

The current implementation of Ontario's special education policy often requires psychological tests, and by extension the IPRC, to identify if a student has an exceptionality and determine a placement and needed special education supports.

People for Education [reported in 2017](#) that an estimated 37,000 children in Ontario were waiting for professional assessment and/or a special education placement through an IPRC.

Understandably, parents should not wait years for their child to receive special education supports, so those who can afford to pay for private testing do so and bring the results to the school so that an IPRC can be scheduled more quickly. In her book *Unequal Benefits: Privatization and Public Education in Canada*, Sue Winton warns us that privatization is not a phenomenon that just happens, it is a process. Private psychological testing is just one way parents are actively privatizing public education and shifting toward prioritizing individual benefits over collective ones.

Barriers to a special education placement continue even after a child has received a psycho-educational assessment and an IPRC. The current statistical model for special education funding has transformed the role of district school boards from one of enabling access to needed services to one of gatekeeping: rationing scarce resources from a fixed allocation of funding from a provincial government with a mandate of cost containment. It is impossible for the IPRC to consider a full range of responsive placement options within these constraints.

Since June 2024, the closure of several special education classes has been reported:

- District School Board Ontario North East announced it was closing a high-support self-contained classroom in Hearst
- Peel District School Board is cutting communication classes that offer specialized literacy supports
- Greater Essex County District School Board trustees voted to eliminate the Reaching Individual Success and

Excellence (RISE) program for special education to make up for a \$6.3 million deficit

- Ottawa-Carleton District School Board intends to phase out some special education classrooms, leaving over 400 students without a special education placement

When it comes to special education programs surviving budgetary constraints and austerity measures, families have good reason to be worried.

EXAMPLE

There is room for district school boards to individually interpret the [Ontario Ministry of Education](#) defined criteria regarding the identification of students, which creates additional barriers for students across Ontario.

Let's consider Xander, whose intellectual index and adaptive functioning score is in the 7th percentile. If Xander lives in Guelph, he would meet the [Upper Grand District School Board](#) criteria for an exceptionality of a mild intellectual disability (MID) (between 2nd and 8th percentile). However, if Xander lives a 60-minute car ride east in Etobicoke, he would not meet the [Toronto District School Board](#) criteria for an MID exceptionality (between 1st and 5th).

LIMITED RESOURCES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

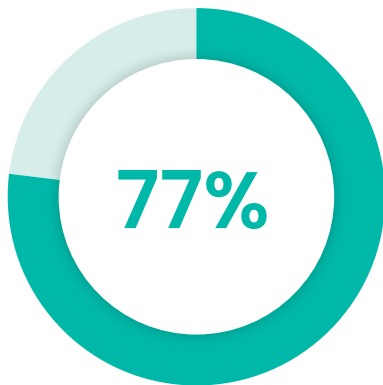
For years, disability advocates have been sounding the alarm about how insufficient resources and supports in schools often result in children with disabilities being excluded from the classroom because their needs cannot be accommodated.

People for Education has been tracking this reality for the last decade. According to their [2024 annual report on access to special education](#), the number of principals who asked parents if their child with special needs could stay home instead of attending

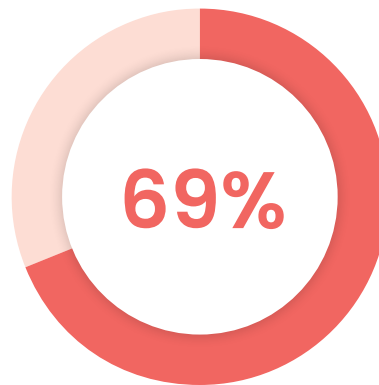
school because of insufficient supports has steadily increased – from 48 per cent in 2014 to 58 per cent in 2018 and 63 per cent in 2024.

These requests to keep children home were often undocumented. This has become an issue for advocacy groups when demanding more funding and supports from the government. It is also a clear example of deteriorating funding, poor policy, and how the ongoing history of special education hides inequity.

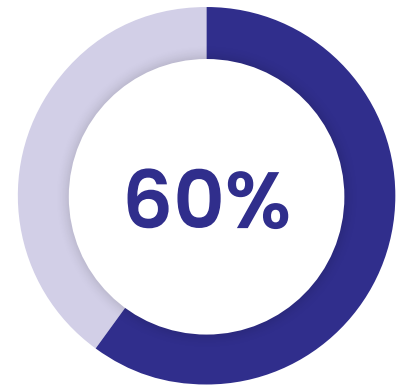
The lack of student support was a major theme in the 2023 ETFO violence survey:



of ETFO members report in-class supports have decreased during their time in the public school system, including 50 per cent who say they have decreased significantly



of ETFO members report in-school supports like child and youth and guidance counsellors have decreased, including 35 per cent who say they have decreased significantly



of ETFO members report board supports in the form of behaviour specialist and itinerant staff have decreased, including 34 per cent who say they have decreased significantly

These declines have occurred alongside increasing rates of students with exceptionalities and complex needs in public schools.

INCREASING SCHOOL VIOLENCE BECAUSE OF UNMET STUDENT NEEDS

“I have [chased] kids down the road. Wooden blocks used to wedge open doors have been whipped at my face. I have been scratched, had chairs thrown at me. I have been bitten, spat on, I have gotten punched in the face. I almost broke my arm chasing after children. I put myself in front of kids, so they don’t get hurt. I would rather me take that on. I do these things because I want to protect children who are being violent, as well as the children around them.”

*– Special Education Teacher,
ETFO 2023 all-member violence survey*

Respondents to the ETFO’s 2023 all-member violence survey reported an increase in the number and severity of violent incidents in elementary schools. More than three quarters (77 per cent) of ETFO members have personally experienced violence or witnessed violence against another staff person. This is an increase from the 70 per cent reported in 2017.

Ontario is not alone, however, and some provinces are taking action. In October 2024, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [announced it was investing \\$976,000](#) in addition to placing 47 new specialized staff in schools as part of a pilot program aimed at addressing and preventing violence in the classroom. The investment followed a [report by the province's auditor general](#), which revealed that incidents of school violence against students and educators had increased province-wide by 60 per cent over the previous seven years, from 17,000 to 27,000 in 2023.

Meanwhile in Ontario, the fall economic statement, released around the same time in October, provided no meaningful new investment to support public education and instead offered \$200 rebates to eligible taxpayers and their children at a cost of almost \$3 billion dollars. In a [press release](#), ETFO president Karen Brown stated, "It is outrageous that the Ford government is choosing to cut funding for public schools while using Ontarians' own money to attempt to buy their votes. The message is loud and clear: public education does not matter to this government."

LACK OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORTS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

There is a lack of transparency regarding protocols in district school boards to help teachers determine if English language learners may need special education support. Only a handful of district school boards provide information about assessing English language special education needs in their special education plans, creating barriers for families and their children. For those that do have guidelines and processes, it is unclear how well these function, and if any professional learning is provided to educators to support this work.

Additionally, many educators share that students could not “double-dip” support ([Parekh et al, 2024](#)). Members in ETFO focus groups indicated that they feel ill-equipped, due to lack of resources and training, to support English language learners who may have special education needs.

With approximately one-third of students in Ontario schools speaking a language other than English or French, understanding how to support linguistically diverse students in any program is greater now than ever before. The Ontario Ministry of Education must address the systemic barriers that bar English language learners from the specialized support and considerations required when they may need access to special education programs and services.

“We don’t have any tools or knowledge around how to detect learning disability in a student who’s coming as a multilingual or an ESL learner. That’s the tricky part. I think that’s why boards are hesitant. I think in the past, our ELL students didn’t have access to Empower because it’s hard to tease out. That’s just something that eventually boards will have to figure out, because [these students] will fall through the cracks if we don’t have a system.”

*– Regular Classroom Teacher,
2024 ETFO special
education focus groups*

INEQUITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES PERSIST

Education historian Jason Ellis describes special education starting with the founding of the first four classes in Ontario for students with disabilities or learning difficulties in the Toronto Board of Education in 1910. This reform was an unexpected convergence between eugenics, bureaucratic efficiency, and measures intended to make life better for neglected and disadvantaged children and youth.

The overrepresentation of boys in special education dates to the auxiliary classes of the Toronto Board of Education in the 1920s. Historians argue that special education classes evolved as a convenient way for school officials to deal with “difficult” boys. A set of “backstage rules” was used that allowed auxiliary classes to become a secret dumping ground for pupils with behavioural problems, with or without a disability. Even today, it remains unclear whether an overrepresentation of boys in special education represents a difference in incidence or in identification (Grant, 2014).

On the other side of an overrepresentation of boys in special education is the underrepresentation of girls, who are less likely to receive diagnoses of autism and ADHD, in part because diagnostic criteria may be biased toward male presentation of these conditions ([Hare et al, 2024](#); [Law, 2024](#)).

In their [2024 report on access to special education in Ontario](#), People for Education reports that lower-income neighbourhoods have a greater percentage of children receiving special education supports than higher-income areas (20 per cent versus 14 per cent). Conversely, schools in lower-income areas that have less access to psychologists to perform psycho-educational assessments, a requirement of the IPRC process, have higher rates of IEPs for children who have not undergone a formal identification process (94 per cent versus 84 per cent).

This disparity is important, as guaranteed supports for “exceptional” students are only guaranteed by the IPRC process. Families with the means to pay for faster identification are therefore in a better position to ensure their children are receiving the resources they need.

CONCLUSION

For too long, ETFO has been sounding the alarm about the state of special education in Ontario. After years of funding cuts and policy changes by the Doug Ford Conservative government, school boards simply do not have the ability to provide children with disabilities in this province with the supports, resources, and programs they need to succeed. The system is fundamentally broken.

The Ontario government must appropriately fund our education system to ensure a full range of responsive placements and supports for children with disabilities. Schools must be designed to nurture authentic community so that all students have a full and valued presence within their classrooms.

Ricardo Tranjan and Carolina Aragão from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) suggest three “quick fixes” to improve the funding formula used in Ontario to help close the gaps between the existing programs and the needed supports:

1 Index special education funding to inflation. When accounting for inflation, special education funding has decreased over the last seven years.

2 Address the assessment backlog. ETFO data reveals that 59 per cent of children receiving special education support have not been assessed by an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process, indicating the lack of school board resources to meet demands related to special education.

3 Enhance the statistical model. The Differentiated Needs Allocation statistical model, which makes up 37 per cent of special education funding, is flawed in two obvious ways: the use of census data from almost 20 years ago and limited demographic characteristics used from the Ontario School Information System (OnSIS).

Tranjan and Aragão also provide a “real fix” to heal special education in Ontario:

Replace the general-enrolment-based funding and the statistical model with a funding formula based on assessed student needs and individual support plans.

Ensuring all Ontarians thrive is essential for the economic and social health of the province. That support begins in elementary school. ETFO is urging the Ontario Ministry of Education to adopt our 27 recommendations so that children with special education needs thrive.

“Bottom line: the quality of programming for special education is severely compromised as the government makes more funding cuts. It is a disservice to students in Ontario and a violation of the *Education Act*.”

*– Special Education Teacher,
self-contained classroom, ETFO 2024
special education focus groups*

ETFO RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure a full range of responsive special education placements and supports that honour a child as a whole person are available in each district school board.
- 2** That the Ministry of Education convene a special education committee that includes education stakeholders (including the affiliates) that meets three times during the school year to review and advise on special education policy.
- 3** That the Ministry of Education engage education unions as full partners in the discussion and implementation of special education at local and provincial levels.
- 4** That the Ministry of Education allocate increased, ongoing, and sustainable funding for high-quality professional learning for educators in special education and student mental health, to take place within the instructional day.

- 5 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding for the creation and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP) including professional development and the development of curriculum-related resources.
- 6 That the Ministry of Education immediately index special education funding to inflation, address the assessment backlog, and enhance the statistical model.
- 7 That the Ministry of Education resume the practice of including the breakdown of funding allocations under the education category in the provincial budget.
- 8 That the Ministry of Education establish an independent, external review of Ontario's education funding formula to ensure it reflects actual student needs and close any funding gaps that may exist by increasing base special education grants.
- 9 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased enveloped special education funding that is more accessible and allows for more flexibility to meet the wide range of needs of all children throughout the school year.
- 10 That the Ministry of Education increase funding to ensure every Kindergarten class is staffed with a full-time certified teacher and a designated early childhood educator.
- 11 That the Ministry of Education increase funding for early reading intervention services, special education services, resources, professional development, and staffing for children in Year 1 and 2 of Kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2.
- 12 That the Ministry of Education amend [Regulation 132/12](#) of the Education Act and cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24 children.
- 13 That the Ministry of Education amend [Regulation 132/12](#) of the Education Act and cap Kindergarten class size at 26 children.
- 14 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding that ensures all children with exceptionalities have access to the full range of special education placements that meet their needs, from full withdrawal to full integration, with accompanying services, programs, and resources.
- 15 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to increase special education teachers and educators for children to receive the direct support necessary to meet their needs.
- 16 That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to school boards for the purchase of technology devices on a 1:1 basis for children in Grade 4 and above.

17

That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to school boards for the hiring of additional behavioural therapists, child and youth workers, educational assistants, guidance counsellors, psychologists, registered nurses, school support counsellors, social workers, special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, teacher-librarians, and other specialized teachers to support culturally relevant and responsive support to children.

18

That the Ministry of Education provide adequate funding to school boards to ensure availability of appropriately trained staff to fill absences.

19

That the Ministry of Education implement a province-wide strategy to address violence in schools.

20

That the Ministry of Education develop and deliver long-term, fully funded, comprehensive, culturally responsive mental health and special education supports for children.

21

That the Ministry of Education ensure that district school boards comply with their legal obligations under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* to provide a safe working environment.

22

That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure that an expanded range of programs are provided by school boards to support English language learners with special education needs.

23

That the Ministry of Education ensure that district school boards spend ESL grants on their intended purpose.

24

That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding for ongoing high-quality professional development for teachers and education workers supporting ELLs with possible special education needs, to take place within the instructional day.

25

That the Ministry of Education allocate increased funding to ensure that district school boards provide a variety of programs for children disadvantaged by intersectional issues that contribute to marginalization, including socioeconomic status, such as but not limited to breakfast and lunch programs, 1:1 technology programs, and free before- and after-school care.

26

That the Ministry of Education require district school boards to collect disaggregated race-based data and provide professional development opportunities to eradicate continued over- and underrepresentation within special education.

27

That the Ministry of Education commit to increased professional development on the importance of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy as it relates to student engagement and its implications on the special education identification process.

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