

Submission to
The Minister of Education and
The Minister of Children, Community and Social Services

Autism Consultation

May 29, 2019



Ontario Catholic School
Trustees' Association



Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association

Mission Statement

Inspired by the Gospel, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association provides the provincial voice, leadership and service for elected Catholic school trustees to promote and protect publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario.

Vision Statement

Ontario is enriched by a publicly funded Catholic education system, governed by locally elected Catholic school trustees who serve with faith, commitment and compassion.

Introduction

On behalf of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association ("OCSTA") we are pleased to provide you with our submission to the consultation on Ontario's Autism Program. The structure and funding of the program will have an impact on our school boards. We have consulted with our boards in developing this submission and it reflects the key concerns of our boards.

The Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) was founded in 1930. It represents 237 elected Catholic trustees who collectively represent 29 English-language Catholic district school boards. Together, these school boards educate approximately 545,000 students from junior kindergarten to grade 12 and adults in continuing education programs province-wide.

Inspired by the Gospel, the Mission of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association is to provide leadership, service and a provincial voice for elected Catholic school trustees who seek to promote and protect publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario.

Ontario's Autism Program

The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services' restructured Autism Programs core objective is to reduce wait times for various psychological services and behavioural supports for children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder ("ASD").

In summary, the key features of the new Autism Program include:

- Establishing a "childhood budget" for families with children with an autism diagnosis. This will provide families with funding until their child is 18 years old to a maximum of \$140,000, or \$20,000 annual in direct funding for children under 6 years and \$5,000 annually for children between 6-18 years.
- Families will be able to purchase services with this new childhood budget from providers of their choice on a fee for service basis.
- Increasing the number of diagnostic centres.
- Establishing an independent intake agency
- Increasing oversight and regulation of service providers.

Autism Program Consultation

The key objective of the current consultation on the restructured Autism Program is to gather advice and evidence from stakeholders and autism experts in respect of developing a "needs-based approach" to assessments, programs and services for children with ASD. The consultation will also consider enhancements to the direct funding model via childhood budgets for families. OCSTA appreciates the opportunity to provide input into this process that will assist government in understanding the impacts on school boards.

Ministry of Education Support for Students with ASD

The Ministry of Education has indicated that, as a result of the restructured Autism Program, school boards will require additional supports and resources to manage the increased number of students with ASD anticipated to enroll in schools by the fall of 2019. These supports and resources were outlined in the March 11, 2019 Memorandum from the Deputy Minister of Education to Directors of Education and background information released from the Ministry of Education to support the Autism Program Consultation¹. Key resources include:

- \$1 million in annual funding to subsidize professional learning of teachers and education assistants to attain additional qualifications to support students with ASD;
- \$2 million in training opportunities available for boards through the Geneva Centre for Autism for teachers and education assistants;
- Professional Activity Days focused on supporting students with ASD;
- Expanding funding for Behaviour Expertise Allocation and Student Supports in the GSN (\$15.2 million), \$24.4 million to hire staff with Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) expertise and \$6 million for ABA training;
- Continue all parts of the Special Education Grant in the GSN (\$3 billion-2019-2020);
- Expanding after-school skills development programs across all boards and making an additional investment of \$6 million;
- Continue the “Connections for Students” program with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to support boards with students transitioning from community services into schools.

Challenges for Catholic School Boards

OCSTA sincerely appreciates the increased and targeted support provided by the Ministry of Education to assist boards in meeting the needs of students with ASD. Enhancements to professional learning for our board staff as well as increased funding for the Behaviour Expertise Allocation, Student Supports and ABA training are especially welcomed. However, OCSTA has a number of concerns about the potential impacts the increased number of ASD students enrolling in schools in September will have on board resources.

To begin, it is important to note the current fiscal context school boards face in respect of their special education budgets. Almost all of our Catholic boards face persistent deficits in funding the services and supports for our special education students generally. With the Special Education Grant remaining constant within this year's GSN, it will be challenging to meet the needs of additional (and as yet undetermined) number of new special education students with ASD. Additional structural problems boards face in respect of the Special Education Grant include the Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA) and its differential impact on boards. The problem is this new grant structure has redistributive funding impacts across all boards, some gaining and some losing funding.

¹ See <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/autism.html>).

This inequity is placing a significant strain on many boards and presents unfairness to their special education students. A recent report from the Elementary Teachers Federation states:

The change from identified needs to the statistical model [DSENA], which the government has now finished phasing in, gave rise to significant shifts in funding among boards. In 2016-17 (the last year for which both high needs amounts and statistical amounts were reported), the biggest losers were the two Toronto boards – Toronto public and Catholic – and Halton public, with losses of \$8.6 million, \$6.5 million and \$7.6 million, respectively.²

A second key problem is the capacity of the “Connections for Students Program” for boards. This program is designed for boards and community agencies supporting children with ASD as those children transition into school. The window for planning the required Individual Education Program (IEP), aligning supports and resources is generally several months with a more predictable number of children entering the system. With what may be a significant increase in children entering schools in the fall of 2019 due to the changes in the Autism Program, and the lack of time to prepare both students and schools, boards may have difficulty ensuring education programs are fully aligned to these students needs. For example, schools may not be in a position to continue various therapies ASD students are currently receiving in the community. In addition, boards typically don’t have comprehensive ABA therapy programs but offer limited programs of this sort.

This leads to another issue—the role of community agencies in supporting children with ASD as they transition into school. Boards may have local agreements with community-based children service agencies but many do not. This could lead to program gaps and needed supports for ASD students not being available.

In terms of accommodating students with ASD, specialized classrooms and equipment may be required. With the uncertainty as to the number of new ASD students coming into the system, boards will likely have a difficult time finding sufficient space and applying for funds for specialized equipment.

Another challenge relates to the hiring of qualified or board certified behaviour analysts to administer ABA programs for students with ASD. The extra funding from the GSN is certainly welcomed but there may be a shortage of those qualified personnel to provide those therapies and related supports. Boards will also struggle finding and training central board staff to support teachers and therapists in these specialized areas. And there is the issue of timing: boards will still be pressed to ensure teachers, education assistants and other boards’ staff are prepared and trained to manage ASD students as they enter the system in the fall.

OCSTA Program Recommendations

To address the short-term challenges of managing new ASD students in the fall of 2019 entering the system, OCSTA recommends:

² Shortchanging Ontario Students: An Overview and Assessment of Education Funding in Ontario, August 2017, p. 4.

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1. Work with boards to streamline a process to ensure community agencies providing support to ASD children transitioning into schools can continue to support those students;
 2. Continue to survey and monitor the situation with boards and provide program/financial support as required to ensure students with ASD can be assessed in a timely manner so boards can make the necessary accommodations;
 3. Review and expand the capacity of the “Connections for Students” program with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services to ensure boards and agencies can develop transition plans in an expedited fashion for ASD students.

To manage longer term issues, OCSTA recommends:

1. Review the structure of the Special Education Grant and the DSNA and consider reforms that are based on the actual circumstances of boards in respect of their special education students;
2. Consider program changes to the curriculum of B.Ed. degrees and related teacher and board staff training programs to expose them to ABA training and other therapies to support ASD students.
3. Examine the feasibility of creating an inter-ministerial committee of relevant line ministries to develop an integrated, coordinated approach to providing services for students with complex needs.

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
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