



DELIVERY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION FUNDING: AN UNDER RESOURCED MISMATCH

PREAMBLE

The Ontario Public Supervisory Officials' Association (OPSOA) represents the Directors of Education and Superintendents, the senior executive leaders, in public district school boards (DSB's) of Ontario. Matching provincial funding to the delivery of special education services to meet the diverse and exceptional needs of many students in this province has been a significant problem over the past eighteen months. The current funding model does not recognize or address the realities of the current needs and growing needs of special education students. Our members face this mismatch daily as expectations of parents and students exceed the available resources a school district can commit to those needs. OPSOA members remain committed to assisting our DSB's in providing a range of placements to meet the needs of exceptional students.

OPSOA, within its organizational value system, believes it must influence the availability of appropriate resources for the learning needs of all students and, therefore submits that:

- The Ministry has never defined the expectations regarding service by boards to students with special needs or the real cost of funding such service.
- The current funding model for special education is seriously flawed.
- The current special education funding model does not respond to the current diversity of delivery systems among the 72 school districts.
- The current funding model for special education requires a major overhaul so that it responds to expressed principles and standards of delivery that are publicly and professionally acceptable.
- If the current model is maintained, then additional funds will be required to meet the legislative and policy directions of the Ministry of Education.

SITUATION

As an organization of senior education officials, we felt the need to voice our mounting concern with the disparity between funding and delivery of special education services within our boards individually and within the province collectively. In order to align with the change in funding and criteria, service to students is being cut and groups of students are being excluded from previous recognition as Individual Support Amount (ISA) eligible students. In addition, direct service to students has been disrupted as a result of the intensive labour and paper gathering collection of information for the ISA review.

When the initial Ministry model for funding special education was announced, boards attempted to be compliant with data on ISA students within a very short time line. Data was gathered for the spring of 1998 and reviews occurred over the summer of 1998. The Ministry had promised an in-year catch-up for students missed which never occurred. The Ministry created an expert panel (Refinement Committee) to make recommendations on changes to the ISA process and Supervisory Officers served on that committee through the fall of 1998. There was extensive consultation concerning their recommendations. The Ministry saw fit to alter most of the committee's recommendations.

When the Ministry released details of the funding model in March 1999, and the changes to the

criteria and support data needed in April 1999, district boards were forced again into a difficult situation. Many boards were well underway with their special education plans, which did not match the new “vision” from the Ministry. The supporting data needed to substantiate claims for ISA eligibility had altered again and many boards were caught in a catch-up situation. Direct service to students had been adversely affected as boards began the labour intensive process of identification and collection of supportive data.

The concept identified as “stable funding” was not stable funding. The stable funding identified in the model did not provide for growth in the number of ISA eligible students not previously identified or for new growth. The \$15 increase to Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) was inadequate. More and more pressure was being placed on SEPPA funding for support to a larger range of students and services. District School Boards had serious shortfalls in what they received for special education funding and what they actually spent on services and students with special needs. Other necessary services were not delivered in order to meet this shortfall.

In the Second Interim Report on the Progress Review of Ontario’s New District School Boards released by the Education Improvement Commission (EIC) on Friday, October 1, 1999, the EIC stated that “almost every board we have reviewed expressed strong concerns about the funding of special education. We heard these concerns from central board staff, teachers, parents, representatives of the special education advisory committees (SEAC’s) and members of the community.”

OPSOA presents in the following our serious concerns for both the process and the current funding model.

PROCESS

This year’s funding is based on the collection of last year’s audited submissions which was based on flawed assumptions. The process, which was to be stable for three years, changed mid-stream.

There is no recognition in the announced changes on special education funding for 1999-2000, for the real costs boards will incur as a result of growth to both the ISA level students and the SEPPA students. Again from the EIC “for many boards, the overall funding of special education does not meet the needs that they perceive exists”.

Mid-year reviews of the data were promised but not delivered. Past financial constraints and cutbacks have led to serious shortages of funding to meet student special needs.

The increase in SEPPA does not compensate for the imbalance in ISA; for example, it would take 1800 SEPPA students to balance funding for each additional ISA level 3 claim

Given the very short time line on the new specifications presented on April 12, 1999, the data collection process for validation was too people intensive and time consuming. It negatively affected the delivery of service in that staff took time from students to collect the necessary data for ISA eligibility. This is a real workload issue especially for school boards that have been downsizing central and resource staff.

There is no recognition that the freeze in ISA funding is impacted by the decision of the Ministry of Community and Social Services to limit its pre-school service and to increase the number of ISA eligible children into the kindergarten programs of the education system.

District School Boards will be impacted by the number of ISA level 2 and 3 students who were currently in senior kindergarten and who will move to grade one, thereby changing their resource support and assistance needs from 0.5 to 1.0 day. District School Boards were not allowed to present cases for the needs of these students.

District School Boards began the process from different beginnings, some had mitigation funds or

reserves to use to supplement special education, some made substantial cuts in service last year, some are cutting special education delivery this year, but for many boards service delivery to special education has been reduced not increased as a result of the process.

MODEL

The student profiles created and endorsed by the Ministry of Education's Refinement Committee are not those used in the current ISA documents.

The funding matrix being used is not the matrix created and endorsed by the Refinement Committee.

There are major groups of students with special needs who were previously eligible but due to the changes in the identification criteria are no longer ISA eligible. These include students with behavioral, mild intellectual disability with other presenting factors, and learning disabled students without ADHD.

There is no recognition of the additional funds that boards have contributed to special education above their funding for special education. Provincially that comes to approximately \$100 million over the allocation for special education. As a result other services (e.g. facilities maintenance) are not being adequately supported and DSB's are facing future time bombs.

There is a built-in bias which supports clearly an inclusionary model rather than the delivery of services through a variety of placements and support. Many parents are now confused and angry that previous support has now been withdrawn.

There is no recognition in the model of professional support for individual students in calculating specific supports for ISA students or the provision of support required before, after and at lunchtime. There was no recognition of the reasonable layering of support from professional support staff. These costs now must come from SEPPA.

There is an indication that the model will change again and therefore it leads one to question the applicability and usefulness of data currently being collected under short time lines.

There is too much pressure on SEPPA to provide the multitude of service requirements for students with special needs. In many boards service to students with mild to moderate disabilities has been affected.

CONCLUSION

OPSOA is prepared:

- to assist staff in the Ministry of Education to develop a funding model for special education services that will be more responsive to the reality of needs,
- to continue to collaborate jointly with our Catholic and French-language colleagues, to serve as the Ministry would find helpful, to ensure that the needs of those distinct systems are included in any solution,
- to work with Trustees, School Councils, SEAC's, parents and other community partners to inform parents of the changes to special education and their ramifications and to work together to find solutions

Representatives from this organization have met as part of a consortium, through the summer, with senior Ministry officials. We are prepared to continue to do so in an attempt to reach a suitable resolution to a substantial mismatch so that the frustrations of DSB professionals, parents, the Minister's Advisory Committee on Special Education, Trustees and numerous stakeholder groups in the education sector can be resolved.

Boards need short-term relief to cope with growth and the increased demand on service. Boards need more flexibility to respond to local needs. In the long-term the special education framework needs to be reviewed and re-designed.

OPSOA wants the government to commit now to restoring the level of service for special education students to at least the level of service committed by the school boards in this province in 1997. Our students and their parents deserve more than we can provide today.