**2016-17 EDUCATION FUNDING: DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

**Excerpt from 2016-17 Education Funding:** [**Discussion Summary**](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1617/2016_ds_en.pdf)

 **INTRODUCTION**

This report reflects the ongoing commitment of the Ministry of Education to work with the education community to improve the funding mechanisms that support education in Ontario. It provides an overview of extensive discussions that the ministry recently undertook with its partners and stakeholders.

 **SPECIAL EDUCATION GRANT**

This grant provides additional funding to boards for students with special education needs. It helps support the incremental costs of programs, services and/or equipment those students require. The six allocations within the Special Education Grant are described in the [2016-17 Education Funding: A Guide to the Special Education Grant](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1617/2016_spec_ed_guide_en.pdf), which is available on the ministry’s website.

In addition to the Pupil Foundation Grant and other Grants for Student Needs funding, the ministry allocates funding for students with special education needs through the Special Education Grant. School boards have the ability to use other allocations of the Grants for Student Needs to support students with special education needs.

Special Education Grant funding is “enveloped.” Boards may use the Special Education Grant only for special education, and must defer any unspent funding to use for special education in a future school year.
 **General discussion**

Many participants noted increasing pressure on special education supports. Roughly one in six students in Ontario now receive special education programs and services.

It was noted that more children appear to be entering kindergarten with special education needs, which are often very complex. Boards were concerned about the ability to support these students and their families. As the number of students with very high needs goes up, it was noted that fewer resources are available to help those with relatively minor needs. As well, safety of school staff and other students is an increasing concern.

Boards suggested increased teacher training and professional development in particular, because students with very complex needs can affect the learning environment for the whole class. Other participants noted that educational assistants, who often interact closely with these students, would also benefit from professional development.

Mental health issues were a special concern. It was noted that there is a fine line between education and treatment, and this is becoming increasingly blurred within the school system. A related point is that social services are voluntary whereas education is compulsory, so the school may have to provide services by default.

The feeling was that the Ministry of Education needed to work with other relevant ministries to ensure provincial funding is spent effectively and efficiently.

Another area that boards grappled with was a model of inclusion/integration for students with special education needs (seen as more desirable, but requiring more space, training and supports) versus separation. Different boards take different approaches, but the funding model does not reflect this reality.

It was noted that this issue is part of a bigger conversation that the ministry and its partners need to engage in about what works best for students with special education needs.

Adding to boards’ concerns, they reported an increase in legal challenges that have resulted in higher staff and legal costs. Some of the capital costs related to special education space needs that are not funded were noted earlier. Other costs include installing ramps, repainting to avoid trigger colours, and providing similar building accommodations.

On accountability, one participant said that educational assistants funded through the special education envelope spend considerable time supervising the general student population, instead of working with students with special education needs.

**The incremental nature of funding**

Most board officials said they understood that the funding was incremental, but that it was a difficult message. References to “topping up” special education funding or being “over budget” create a perception that funds were coming from money that should have gone to other students.

Some, however, felt that identifying the grant as “incremental” created a silo mentality, and that a more integrated model for all learners is better. A few noted that the discussion was not relevant to parents whose focus was on the services provided to their children, not how they were funded.

Numerous participants asked for a guide similar to The Guide to the Grants for Student Needs that would explain special education funding.

**Achieving greater effectiveness and efficiency**

Participants had several suggestions for improving the impact of existing funding:

* Integrate and connect service providers/agencies, the school/teacher and parents to share information about the student. Support this by developing a list of local resources.
* Make pooled services available by region.
* Especially in more remote areas, supplement face-to-face meetings with on-line video training for parents.
* Provide on-line training for teachers.
* Develop and provide on-line therapy for students in remote areas with specific needs, for example speech or language issues.

Some suggestions related more to policy issues:

* Because students with autism spectrum disorder have difficulty with transitions, it was suggested that boards and the ministry explore ways of allowing them stay in their classes over the summer.
* Many students with mental health problems want to attend secondary school full-time, but sometimes need to take time off. If they exceed a 15-day limit on absence in their individual classes, they have to drop courses, which means going part-time or not at all. Allowing these students to “take a pause” without losing their full-time status would be helpful.
* The Special Education per Pupil Amount allocation is based on enrolment of all students. Many boards felt that this might not be the best approach, because special education needs are generally growing faster than total enrolment.

**High Needs Amount**

The “High Needs Amount” is moving to a model that attempts to recognize the differences among school boards in their population of students with special education needs and school boards’ ability to support these needs. This is done through calculations that predict the likelihood of a student of a board having special education needs, information about these students, and other factors that impact the board’s ability to respond to those needs. Given this change, most participants who expressed a view agreed with the ministry that the name “High Needs Amount” should change to be more in line with the model and its purpose. On the issue of the change in the allocation method, many smaller boards said they appreciated greater reliance on reliable, provincially consistent data.

There was also a tension noted between measures in the formula that help boards with below-average performance and measures that recognize the boards that provide more support to students at the time of testing.

**Measures of need for the High Needs amount**

Participants’ suggestions on data that might improve the allocation of this funding included:

* A school’s utilization factor and the extra administrative needs.
* Data on families living in poverty and on property values (although some felt the latter might be skewed).
* The Trillium system, which contains live data from school boards.
* Information on greater concentrations of need outside major centres, where housing for group homes is less expensive and/or there are pockets of rural poverty.
* Health and safety reports on violent incidents involving students with special education needs, if these could be prepared on a consistent basis across boards.
* Reports on students on alternative curricula, with the caveats that these would need to be defined consistently, and that remote boards may not have enough students to support an alternative curriculum.
* Number of tuition agreements with First Nations.
* Health data on parameters that correlate with higher special education needs, for example suicide incidents, low birth weights and mother’s age. Northern boards, however, urged caution in using diagnoses where there is low or no access to diagnostic resources.
* Board’s ability to access other community resources that might support students with special education needs.
* Information on the population served by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and/or Children’s Aid.

Participants also felt that the statistical prediction component, which uses data from the 2006 census, needed to be updated. In addition, the data comes from postal codes, which those in rural areas felt can be skewed because of low population. They noted that in those areas, funding based on the distance from major cities and between a board’s schools becomes more important.

**Special Equipment Amount**

Boards said it would be useful to have more detailed information and research on what is the best equipment to purchase and its longevity. In addition, some identified some significant reporting requirements on the technology component of this allocation.

**Special Incidence Portion**

Because this funding is claims-based, there was some concern about variation between boards in their ability to prepare and submit claims. Some wondered whether a formula could be developed. Others recommended against this, since funding is supposed to be based on actual costs. Because the claims process is time-consuming, it was suggested that a three-year cycle could replace the existing annual one.

**Facilities Amount**

This funding covers the costs of education programs for school-age students provided by school boards in settings outside their own classrooms, under agreement with an outside facility, institution or agency.

Boards suggested the funding could be used more efficiently and effectively through collaboration with coterminous boards and/or social service agencies. They would also like more flexibility to try new approaches. They also noted that they are being asked to cover costs, for example transportation, that existing funding does not cover.

While the processes associated with the funding are complex, boards were split on whether the agency or facility should receive the funding directly or boards should retain control.