

## **LDAO Comments on Special Education Transformation (August 2006)**

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) commends and endorses the overall direction and content of Special Education Transformation, the report of the Co-Chairs with Recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education and we congratulate the co-chairs, Dr. Sheila Bennett and Kathleen Wynne, on building on the ideas and common ground from the process of the Working Table.

LDAO supports the concept of transformation rather than reform of the special education system, since there are important principles that need to be maintained. For example, “accountability for results” must be based on a foundation of compliance with legislation and Ministry policy, and a focus on “access to education” must compliment rather than replace access to special education for those students who require it.

The following highlights LDAO's specific comments on the eight sections of the report.

### **Student Success and Access to Curriculum**

Under this section, there is a good outline of the role of the classroom teacher in providing effective instruction to students with special education needs, “based on research, continual assessment and successful evidence-based practice”. LDAO strongly supports the importance of role of the classroom teacher, but also believes that there must continue to be access to professionals and teachers with special education expertise to compliment the role of the classroom teacher.

LDAO would like to reinforce the importance of the statement that “a range of placements would continue to be available for students whose needs would not be met in the regular classroom” and we would agree that in most cases “these placements would be duration-specific, intervention-focused, and subject to regular reviews.”

The recommendations in this section speak to instructional practices and modification of curriculum, but it is important to clarify the fact that many students require accommodations instead of, or in addition to, modifications in order to be successful. It is crucial that educators and parents understand the essential differences between accommodations and modifications.

LDAO would like to point out that the development of effective instructional practices or program indicators for students can be enhanced by utilizing the extensive information that has already been gathered through the work of the exceptionality specific standards committees.

Similarly, there has already been work completed on developing transition practices for specific exceptionalities, and in the case of students with learning disabilities (LDs) the research carried out by the Learning Opportunities Task Force (LOTF) has provided valuable information on how to facilitate successful transitions to postsecondary education. LDAO encourages the use of these materials in the current development process. There is still a need for research looking at transitioning from elementary into secondary schools in Ontario and we hope that the Ministry will pursue this area of study, especially for students with special education needs.

## **Professional Development**

LDAO is very pleased with the emphasis on professional development at all levels, and we concur that all staff need to be able to educate a wider range of learners, including their students with special education needs.

## **Identification and Support Options**

LDAO agrees with the goal of “improving the balance between the focus on learning and the need for appropriate processes, documentation, and accountability”. However, care must be taken that the balance does not swing in the other direction, and that the benefits of present accountability processes are not lost. We support the need to provide interventions on a timely basis while waiting for the more formal IPRC process to occur. However, it is vital to continue to inform parents of their right to access IPRCs, and to emphasize the importance of their role in both IPRCs and development of IEPs.

Similarly, while we support the use of continuous classroom assessments to monitor progress, LDAO stresses the importance of timely access to professional assessments for those who need them. In the case of students with suspected learning disabilities, psychological assessments provide information on the profile of strengths and weaknesses which is essential for planning appropriate teaching approaches and accommodations.

It would be appropriate here to point out that the Web-Based Teaching Tool, the early screening and intervention program managed for the Ministry of Education by LDAO, is based on the principle of offering timely interventions for students at risk for school difficulties, and provides teachers with a process for continuous classroom assessment.

Finally, we would like to express caution on the development of a provincial IEP template. While consistency of format would be useful, it will be important to ensure that this does not lead to the use of pull-down menus or a ‘cookie-cutter’ approach.

## **Service Integration**

LDAO has always promoted the idea of interministerial cooperation and collaboration in ensuring that students' needs are met. Through our network of 21 provincial learning disabilities chapters, we can be an important link to families and community agencies throughout the province.

## **Parent Collaboration**

LDAO has an important role to play in the goal of enhancing collaborative relationships between educators and parents, and we support the various initiatives for fostering effective parental involvement, including training for educational and administrative staff, and targeted support within the Parent Engagement Office for parents of students with special education needs.

The concept of informal and mandatory dispute mechanisms could be very useful, as long as mediators are chosen by agreement of both the parents and the school board.

## **Accountability and Reporting**

LDAO supports the idea of revising school board plans to focus on targets to improve program planning and accountability for student achievement. However, if Special Education Plans no longer describe the special education programs and services in the board, parents should have easy access to this information in another format, such as in the board's Parent Guide to Special Education. This guide should be available on the board website as well as in schools.

SEACs should be involved in their school board's discussions of improvement plans, in order to ensure that special education is an integral part of the strategy.

The development of a provincial framework for conducting cyclical reviews could be informed by revisiting the Cooperative Evaluation and Development of School Systems (CEDSS) project, widely used in the 1980s.

## **Research**

LDAO believes that research needs to be done on evidence-based practices for specific exceptionalities as well as on approaches that are effective for all children, and should be based on a thorough review of existing research results.

It is also very important that the provincial and demonstration schools take a lead role with these research activities.

## **Special Education Funding Allocation**

LDAO has provided the Ministry with detailed recommendations in the past on changing the funding formula for special education. We believe that we would have valuable input into the development of "a simpler, streamlined funding process" that at the same time allows for supports for all students with special education needs, not just those with 'high needs'. Some previous LDAO correspondence on funding is attached for your information.

Respectfully submitted,

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