December 5, 2016

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Re: Ontario Should Enact an Education Accessibility Standard

Too many accessibility barriers impede students with a physical, sensory, intellectual, mental health, learning, communication or other disability from full inclusion in and fully benefitting from Ontario's education system. These barriers persist at all levels of the education system, i.e. pre-school, school, college, university and job training programs around Ontario.

These barriers make it harder for students with disabilities to succeed in Ontario's education system. They contribute to the high unemployment rate among Ontarians with disabilities.

The Ontario Government needs to address this. We offer a constructive solution. The undersigned community organizations ask the Government to develop an Education Accessibility Standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), as the AODA Alliance <http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/08232016.asp> has urged.

An Education Accessibility Standard should be designed to remove recurring accessibility barriers in our education system, so students with disabilities and their families don't have to sue one barrier at a time, one education organization at a time. This should eliminate the need for each education organization to have to re-invent the same solutions, saving them money.

An Education Accessibility Standard would better serve students with disabilities. It would better support the efforts of the many dedicated people working throughout our education system, who want to ensure that students with disabilities can fully benefit from education programs. It would reinforce Ontario's commitment to achieve an accessible province, as the Federal Government develops national accessibility legislation for the federal sphere.

1. Why Ontario Needs an Education Accessibility Standard

There are at least 334,000 students with special education needs in Ontario's publicly-funded schools, one of six students. In addition to them, large numbers of students with disabilities study in Ontario colleges or universities, or want to do so.

Former Lieutenant Governor David Onley, the Government's Special Accessibility Advisor, says the unemployment rate facing people with disabilities in Canada is not only a national crisis, but a national shame.

We add that a good education is essential to get a good job. The Ontario Government is commendably planning a disability employment strategy. An effective disability employment strategy needs to include an Education Accessibility Standard.

Originally, Ontario's education system was not designed to fully include students with disabilities in the mainstream. As one example, when 2016 began, only 85 of the Toronto District School Board's 550 schools had physical accessibility.

Historically, mainstream classroom teachers were trained to teach students without disabilities. Only special education teachers were trained to teach students with disabilities. Too often, classroom curriculum, gym and playground equipment, and new digital equipment in our education system lack universal design and the accessibility that students with disabilities need.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission's ground-breaking 2003 report, The Opportunity To Succeed: Achieving Barrier-Free Education For Students With Disabilities <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/opportunity-succeed-achieving-barrier-free-education-students-disabilities> documented serious education accessibility barriers. Despite some progress, too many of these persist today.

In 2015, the Ontario Government hired KPMG to review our education system's accessibility barriers, and other jurisdictions' measures to address these.

According to the AODA Alliance's detailed analysis <http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/november-9-2016-aoda-alliance-analyysis-of-kpmg-education-barriers-report.docx> , the KPMG Report <http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/KPMG-ADO-Final-Report-Education-Sep-8-vF.docxhttp:/www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/november-9-2016-aoda-alliance-analyysis-of-kpmg-education-barriers-report.docx> shows our education system has serious accessibility barriers. The KPMG Report doesn't show an Education Accessibility Standard is unnecessary.

Many teachers, professors and others in our education system, and in the Ontario Government, now try to ensure that students with disabilities can be fully included in education programs. An Education Accessibility Standard would help them better serve students with disabilities.

2. What an Education Accessibility Standard Could Do

To its great credit, in 2005, the Ontario Legislature unanimously passed the Government's AODA. The AODA requires the Ontario Government to lead Ontario to become fully accessible to people with disabilities by 2025. There has been progress since then. Yet Ontario's education system is not on schedule to reach full accessibility by 2025.

The Government can choose to create an AODA accessibility standard for a sector, like education, to address its accessibility barriers. Your Government enacted a Transportation Accessibility Standard and committed to develop a Health Care Accessibility Standard.

An Education Accessibility Standard can set measures for educational organizations, like school boards, colleges and universities, to take to remove and prevent recurring accessibility barriers, in mainstream or segregated classrooms. We can learn what has worked inside and outside Ontario, from school boards, colleges, universities, other education organizations, and students with disabilities. The Standard can set varying time lines for action, depending on an educational organization's size and resources. It can establish a modernized process to ensure that students with disabilities and their families have proper input into how they are accommodated.

A helpful AODA Alliance Discussion Paper <http://www.aodaalliance.org/education/Education-Accessibility.docx> offers food for thought. It proposes:

a) The Education Accessibility Standard's purpose should be to ensure that our education system becomes fully accessible to students with disabilities by 2025. Removing and preventing accessibility barriers lets students with disabilities be fully included in our education system.

b) The Standard should apply to education programming in Ontario, including all schools and school boards, whether or not publicly funded, colleges, universities, job training programs, experiential learning programs, and pre-school programs.

c) The Standard should address accessibility barriers facing students with any disabilities, not just the disabilities which Ontario's 36-year-old outdated special education laws recognize. This should include a physical, mental, sensory, intellectual, mental health, learning, communication, neurological or other kind of disability.

The AODA Alliance's <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/education/Education-Accessibility.docx>> Discussion Paper proposes that the Standard can and should include:

a) systematic measures to make it easier to include students with disabilities in the mainstream, where appropriate.

b) accessibility requirements for the education system's built environment e.g. schools, colleges and universities.

c) digital accessibility requirements for our education system. Computers, tablets, online learning resources and libraries, and smart technologies rapidly expand in the education system. Yet no comprehensive measures ensure the digital learning environment's accessibility.

d) provincial standards on letting students with disabilities bringing a service animal to school.

e) measures ensuring accessible instructional materials are available when students with disabilities need them.

f) measures ensuring curriculum is designed based on principles of "Universal Design in Learning" (UDL), to be accessible for students with disabilities, e.g. addressing accessibility barriers to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) curriculum.

g) measures to eliminate attitudinal barriers among students without disabilities that impede the full inclusion of students with disabilities.

h) measures to ensure that testing/assessments accurately assess students with disabilities.

i) measures addressing accessibility barriers in admission criteria for educational programs.

j) measures ensuring students with disabilities can fully participate in experiential learning.

k) measures ensuring sufficient teacher training on teaching students with disabilities.

l) measures removing barriers impeding students with disabilities and their families from prompt access to information needed to fully participate in education programs like schools, e.g. options for them and how to access them.

m) measures removing bureaucratic procedural barriers that can impede effective accommodation of individual students with disabilities at all levels of our education system e.g. creating a fair process for students with disabilities to take part in decisions regarding their education accommodation needs, and to appeal if results are insufficient or are not implemented.

The KPMG Report <http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/november-9-2016-aoda-alliance-analyysis-of-kpmg-education-barriers-report.docx> documents measures in other jurisdictions from which our education system can benefit. They are not the only measures this Standard should address. The undersigned organizations will want to consult their communities and present suggestions.

3. Substantial Support for an Education Accessibility Standard

School teachers, university professors, and others working on our education system's front lines, endorse the call for an Education Accessibility Standard, including the   
Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/07162013.asp>> ,   
Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/09032013.asp>>   
Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/01292014.asp>  
Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/06282013.asp>>   
Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/08232016.asp>> .   
  
This ensures that an Education Accessibility Standard would be well-received.

You wrote the AODA Alliance on May 14, 2014 <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/06132014.asp>> , committing that your Government may create an Education Accessibility Standard. The 2014 Government-appointed AODA <<http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/04292015.asp>> Independent Review Report said an Education Accessibility Standard is a priority.

4. We Are Eager to Help the Government of Ontario

Please appoint an AODA Education Standards Development Committee. That Committee would bring together the disability community, schools, colleges, universities and others, to make recommendations on what the Education Accessibility Standard should include. The Government should let that Committee consult the public, including students with disabilities and their families, on the full range of education barriers. The Government has final say on what to include in an Education Accessibility Standard, after reviewing the Committee's advice.

We are eager to work with your Government, school boards, colleges, universities and all educational organizations to help create an Education Accessibility Standard that will make Ontario proud and a leader on accessibility.

The following organizations endorse and are signatories to this letter.

1. Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance

2. Canadian National Institute for the Blind CNIB

3. March of Dimes Canada

4. Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario

5. Canadian Mental Health Association -Toronto

6. Arch Disability Rights Law Centre

7. Canadian Hearing Society

8. Autism Ontario

9. Views for the Visually Impaired

10. Citizens with Disabilities Ontario

11. Communication Disabilities Access Canada

12. Holland Bloorview Kids Rehab Hospital

13. Deaf Blind Services Ontario

14. Community Living Ontario

15. Stop Gap Foundation

16. Inclusive Design Resource Centre, Ontario College of Art and Design University

17. Physicians of Ontario Neurodevelopmental Advocacy

18. Autism Action Coalition

19. DisAbled Women'S Network of Canada (DAWN Canada)

20. Epilepsy Toronto

21. Epilepsy Ontario

22. Spinal Cord Injury Ontario