

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario Response to OHRC Right to Read Report

March 2022

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) and its community-based chapters represent the interests of persons with learning disabilities (LDs) throughout Ontario. “Learning Disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning. Although LDs may affect a range of academic and non-academic areas, many individuals with LDs have difficulties learning to read. For this reason, LDAO encouraged the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) Public inquiry into human rights issues affecting students with reading disabilities, and urged our members to share their experiences in the Right to Read consultations.

LDAO has long supported the need for evidence-based instruction of reading for all students and with increasing intensity for students who struggle to learn to read. We support curriculum and instruction that reflects the scientific research on the best approaches to teach word reading, sometimes called decoding, as one part of an evidence-based comprehensive approach to teaching all literacy skills.

LDAO has always strongly supported early screening and intervention for reading and pre-reading difficulties. In the early 2000s, the Ministry of Education funded LDAO to consult widely to develop an early screening and intervention program that was used in many Ontario school boards.

LDAO has also recognized the use of the term dyslexia to describe learning disabilities that affect reading, although the term learning disabilities encompasses a wider range of difficulties.

LDAO supports the Right to Read report’s focus on early reading and a majority of the recommendations. The following is an outline of LDAO’s responses to the recommendations, with areas of broad agreement and specific focus on items strongly supported. In addition, there are a few recommendations that require further consultation and discussion, to make sure the rights of students with learning disabilities are protected.

LDAO strongly supports all recommendations that highlight issues of equity in the current system. There should be a focus on removing barriers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, Black and other racialized students, low-income families, students with disabilities, and newcomers. Reading is a human right for all students, and equality of access to required supports is paramount.

Curriculum and instruction

LDAO supports the objectives of revising curriculum and curriculum materials to reflect a scientific approach to reading instruction.

In light of the effects of the Covid-19 restrictions on learning loss, LDAO strongly supports summer reading programs and the Ministry’s development of an education recovery plan. That plan should include intensive, accelerated reading programs that provide explicit, systematic and direct instruction in foundational reading skills including phonemic awareness, phonics and decoding, and fluency for all students. An emphasis on targeting groups most disadvantaged by

school closures related to COVID-19 (students with disabilities, students from low-income families, Black and other racialized students, Indigenous students and newcomers) is vital. (43, 44)

LDAO strongly supports the importance of drawing on the expertise of educators, administrators, speech-language pathologists and psychology staff who are knowledgeable about the science of reading, for systematic and direct instruction in foundational reading skills/structured literacy approaches. (46)

LDAO strongly supports the importance of professional development, at pre-service, job-embedded and Additional Qualifications levels. Professional development will need to be enhanced to include the areas of knowledge outlined in the points under recommendations 54, 55 and 56.

Early Screening

LDAO strongly supports mandated **early, evidence-based universal screening** as outlined in recommendation 60.

LDAO recommends that the Ministry of Education consult with experts in the French language school boards in development of early scientifically validated screening and evidence-based interventions in French. (61)

LDAO calls on the Ministry of Education to ensure that current policies, including PPMs, do not impede the implementation and access to early screening and interventions, including evidence-based reading instruction. (62)

LDAO supports a tiered approach to offering evidence-based reading instruction at increasing levels of intensity.

LDAO supports clear accountability measures and in particular clear standards to support communication with parents and students.

Reading Interventions

LDAO supports implementation of evidence-based interventions in word-reading accuracy and fluency, guided by experts who are knowledgeable about the science of reading. There should be periodic review to ensure programs reflect the latest scientific research. (69)

LDAO supports the importance of using expert knowledge in developing eligibility criteria for specific evidence-based programs. (71)

Access to evidence-based reading interventions should be based on universal screening and a tiered approach of increasing intensity. While tier 1 and 2 interventions should be available in every school, this may not be feasible for intensive tier 3 interventions. (73)

LDAO supports the tiered approach described in recommendation 76. We agree that psychoeducational assessment should not be required for tier 1 and 2 interventions. However, psychoeducational assessments can provide valuable knowledge about individual learning profiles that could guide intervention at tier 3. Students could be provided tier 3 interventions

pending a psychoeducational assessment, although recommendations for timely availability of such assessments could make this unnecessary. (76)

LDAO supports development of mechanisms for data collection and progress monitoring.

LDAO strongly supports clear communication with parents and students at all stages (82)

LDAO supports the need for adequate training of educators to provide tier 2 and 3 interventions, with input from interdisciplinary teams.

Accommodations

LDAO supports the development of **standards for educator professional learning on accommodations and modifications.**

LDAO strongly supports the points under recommendation 86 c., outlining the limited role of modifications as a “last resort”.

Recommendations (90 – 97) on improving **access to accommodations**, including assistive technology and availability of materials in an accessible format, need to align with the recommendations of the Final Report and Recommendations of the *K-12 Education Standards Development Committee*.

LDAO strongly supports recommendation 98 on immediate transfer of a student’s OSR.

LDAO strongly supports the right of students in French language instruction, including French Immersion, to access accommodations and evidence-based reading interventions, and the importance of including parents and students in the accommodation process. ((99)

LDAO believes that educators, parents and students should all be empowered to advocate for needed accommodations. (100)

LDAO supports the development of guidelines on appropriate accommodation timelines. (102)

LDAO strongly supports the recommendation that school boards provide students and parents with a straightforward and meaningful complaint process for accommodations and should refer to it in their Special Education Plans and in all special education guides for parents. (103)

LDAO recommends that the Ministry of Education review criteria for development and use of IEPs, to align with a tiered approach to intervention.

Any board-wide electronic management systems for IEPs should not include an IEP template that limits input to a select number of drop-down options. (107)

IEPs should include documentation of input from parents and students on accommodations, and evaluating and monitoring of the effectiveness of accommodations should be communicated to parents and students on a regular basis. (108)

LDAO strongly supports a requirement for parental informed consent to modifying a student’s curriculum expectations (including making sure they understand the effects on the student’s academic progress, future course options and job opportunities) (109), and public reporting by boards on percentages of students who have had their curriculum expectations modified. ((110)

Professional Assessments

LDAO has strong concerns about some of the recommendations in this section:

LDAO strongly believes that the Ontario psychology profession needs to make any decisions on the use of the term learning disability/ies and the criteria for assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities, taking into account the following points:

- 'Learning disabilities' is a separate diagnosis to the DSM5 Specific Learning Disorder, which is a medical diagnosis of the American Psychiatric Association. The term learning disability/ies) is used in education sectors in the U.S. and Canada.
- The DSM 5 diagnostic criteria for Specific Learning Disorder state that "learning difficulties are *not better accounted for* by intellectual disabilities, uncorrected visual or auditory acuity, other mental or neurological disorders, psychosocial adversity, lack of proficiency in the language of academic instruction, or inadequate educational instruction" (DSM5 p.67, italics added)

LDAO, as stated earlier, supports student access to evidence-based reading instruction without requiring psychoeducational assessment.

LDAO strongly supports the importance of psychoeducational assessment in assessing areas of psychological processing that affect student learning. This may be most important at the level of tier 3 interventions for reading difficulties, where even evidence-based interventions have not been successful at tiers 1 and 2. Psychoeducational assessment also assesses for higher level learning deficits in reading comprehension and written expression, in addition to multi-faceted difficulties in math and executive functioning deficits.

LDAO strongly supports recommendations to improve access to psychoeducational assessment, to remove barriers to access, and to reducing wait times for assessment.

LDAO strongly supports development of accountability measures for improving access and reducing wait time for psychoeducational assessment.

Systemic issues

LDAO supports the need for consistency, monitoring and accountability in the education system, including the following:

Students at risk for reading disabilities/dyslexia and students identified or diagnosed with reading disabilities/dyslexia receive the same level and high quality of special education programming and support no matter which school board they attend. (133)

Students in northern, remote, rural and small boards have equal access to special education programming, professional services and in-school supports. (134)

Students at risk for reading disabilities/dyslexia and students identified or diagnosed with reading disabilities/dyslexia receive the same level and high quality of special education programming and support no matter which school they attend and which teacher(s) they have. (135)

LDAO supports the importance of school board Special Education Plans. Special Education Plans will need to be updated to reflect many of the changes outlined in Recommendation 137.

LDAO believes the Ministry should review all board Special Education Plans annually to make sure requirements are met, give specific feedback to school boards and their SEACs, and monitor implementation of the plans.

LDAO recognizes the need for improved data collection about screening, intervention, accommodation and modification, and professional assessment.

LDAO strongly supports all the recommendations to improve communication and transparency with parents and students. (151 – 155).

LDAO supports involvement of SEACs in developing and conducting surveys of parents. (156)

LDAO strongly supports the development and publication of a non-adversarial dispute resolution program. This should be developed in line with the Final Report and Recommendations of the *K-12 Education Standards Development Committee*. (157)