# SEAC survey open ended questions results – DRAFT [data from survey opening to Oct 31, 2017]

## Recommendations

Respondents (n=1102) had recommendations for the TDSB to better meet the education needs of students with special education needs. Over half (65%) of the suggestions presented were comprised of various school related matters such as concerns with classrooms, staff, and specialized programs. Other recommendations pertained to Board governance (5%), communication (7%), parent involvement or support (4%), and the IEP, IPRC, SEPRC processes (15%). Additional comments (4%) that respondents shared primarily of experiences rather than recommendations.

### School related recommendations

Respondents presented recommendations in multiple areas of interest related to the school including the classroom, staff, and school programs. They emphasized the need for smaller classroom sizes, better integration and having sufficient and available resources for students (i.e., having more one on one interaction between teacher and students to provide individualized learning, assistive technology for students, etc.).

A noteworthy recommendation that was brought up in regards to staff was the need for more support staff (i.e. SNA, EA, psychologist, CYW, social workers, resource teachers, etc.). Many respondents felt that teachers and school administrators lack special education needs knowledge, they noted that they require more awareness and support. Supports include: additional training, attending professional development, additional training for children with autism (i.e. ABA), teaching in a variety of learning styles, teaching gifted children, and using evidence based practices. In addition, school staff (both teachers and school administrators) should be more accountable in providing accommodations and follow through with IEP, which is repeated in terms of communication and the IEP process.

*“More teachers should be available for students with special education needs. Smaller classrooms are also needed. More one on one interaction with the kids. More training for teachers dealing with students with special education needs. Teachers need to stop labeling the students, this does not help the situation.”*

*“The two biggest issues are lack of resources (need more EAs and specialists in the schools) and lack of awareness/lack of acknowledgement (principals and classroom teachers need more training and awareness to appreciate the broad range of spec ed needs and that not all students learn or behave or react in the same ways.)”*

Other respondents focused on access to programs that support students with special needs in relation to geography, accessibility, and availability in their home schools. This was particularly noticeable with the number of respondents that were concerned with the closure of congregated programs and schools. Also, many respondents had concerns with having adequate support for children in high school, in gifted and French programs, with mental health concerns, and with multiple exceptionalities. Similar amounts of respondents addressed being in favour of a more inclusive school environment to those who desired separate classes.

### Board governance

Suggestions related to board governance were related to funding, hiring practices in schools and to a lesser degree, accountability from Central staff. Funding related recommendations included: to provide the support required from assessments, training for staff and resources for students. In addition, some recommended finding ways to address the stigma involving students with special needs with mentions of the Equity and Inclusion Strategy.

*“Provide adequate funding for assessments, and educational assistant support. Provide current continuing education to all staff - many staff operate within a model of stigma, pathology, and exclusion.”*

### IEP, IPRC, SEPRC processes, communication, parent involvement and support

The process of the IPRC, IEP, and SPRC were often described as unnecessarily lengthy, intimidating, lack the use of evidence based practices and they found inconsistencies for the identification process. As such, respondents suggested for earlier and more expansive identification and streamlining the process (i.e., when an assessment is complete, proceed with student placement in an appropriate program without delay). Additionally, they found communication with the processes were lacking in both clarity and accountability, as there is an absence of follow up and follow through. Many pointed out that there was not any continuity in providing sufficient feedback about their child between grades, which was noticeable particular between elementary and high school. A key point many recommended was to improve communication between parents and the school. These include: providing sufficient information to parents about the process as well as community and government resources, more parental involvement and simplifying the language or supply more resources if complex language is used.

*“Provide supports. Encourage early detection. Not to continue to create bureaucratic 'catch 22' situations to 'save money' because there is "no budget" when it is agreed that a child is 'exceptional' and at risk.”*

*“1) Provide meaningful parent and expert consultation as part of the needs assessment process. Currently, the decisions are made prior to parent involvement and all meetings with the parents are solely to placate parents. 2) Provide more transparent communication about the process for getting help and make sure parents know their rights 3) Provide a meaningful process to get help with actual deadlines for delivery, not just deadlines for responses 4) Provide a non-adversarial appeals process that focuses on the needs of the children and not the policies and practices of the board 5) Develop public written policies that address special needs decisions that actually follow the Ministry of Education direction and do not limit child qualification”*

## Student Special Education Needs

Respondents (n=296) shared more information of the special education needs of their child or children. From these responses, about 17% of parents indicated multiple needs. The most frequently mentioned other special education needs outside of the categories listed were ADHD/ADD and mental health related concerns, such as anxiety, depression and OCD. As one parent pointed out,

*“Mental health or social-emotional challenges is not listed and this is a huge systemic issue faced by students and families. Students and families are judged negatively and their needs dismissed when TDSB IPRC systems deem mental health a behavioral or communication exceptionality. Ignorance regarding invisible, brain diseases is evident is the systemic exclusion or mental health and the inaccurate understanding of these disabilities.”*

## Experiences with the TDSB

### Awareness of students special education needs

Respondents (n=272) elaborated more of the period they first became aware of their child’s special education needs. Several indicated more than one period because of either multiple children or because of additional diagnosis for different needs. For instance, this parent stated that *“[their] child was privately diagnosed with giftedness in grade 2 and privately diagnosed (again) with ADHD at the end of grade 7.”*

Comments included both positive and negative experiences. In positive experiences, parents mentioned teachers who provided adequate support for their children or communicated with them about their children early on.

*“A fantastic JK teacher identified that she was seeing things that caused her concern.
 She raised these things gently with us and this allowed us to get an independent psych
ed report early on.”*

In contrast, negative experiences often alluded to a lack of communication between the school and parents, or an absence of supports. Parents also felt discouraged to be assessed by school specialist and often utilized external assessments through other institutions.

*“I first asked for help in kindergarten and then again in grade 1. There was no help available and I kept pushing the issue it was disappointing that my child now in a higher grade is so behind. At the time I was told because my son was one of the youngest to wait and he would mature.”*

*” I knew my son needed special education, but nobody provided information about segregated public school system in Toronto until I heard about their existence by chance.”*

Those who indicated that they were aware either prior to starting school or during kindergarten, felt ignored or that their children were still inadequately supported as this following one commented:

*“Even though our child was identified in j/k as needing extra help we were never told of diagnostic kindergarten. We were told "the real help starts in grade 1" by our local school.”*

### Programs, services, supports, accommodations and other help for your child/children’s special education needs

Comments (n=494) about from whom respondents learned about programs, services, supports, accommodations and other help for their child/children’s special education needs. Excluding the existing options, respondents listed medical professionals (i.e., family doctors, paediatricians and psychologists, etc.), as well as themselves as they work in a related field, and the internet including social media sources (i.e., *“Facebook support groups”* and “*Online groups and forums, Advocating groups”).* Moreover, parents shared that they sought information outside of their child’s school or TDSB often because of their lack of support.

*“The private neuro-psychologist who conducted the psych-ed assessment. Little to no info has ever been provided by the teachers and administration at the school. We have never been offered a direct meeting with the spec ed teacher who provides withdrawal support to our child.”*

 *“I had research things by myself no help at all from the schools!”*

### Initial parental knowledge of programs, services, supports, accommodations

Respondents (n=399) shared both positive and negative experiences about when they first worked with TDSB to meet their child’s needs. Some stated that the Board did not supply information about this, where consequently they sought it through other means (i.e., other agencies, professionals and parents of children with similar needs, etc.).

*“I did have knowledge about Board programs but had to look around for outside agencies too that could support. Some of these outside agencies are still continuing to support.”*

Again, respondents echoed the inadequate support provided by schools for their children and mixed experiences where they had to advocate for their child in order to obtain some support.

*“Despite knowing all that I do about Board policies and procedures, I had a very negative experience with an administrator that did not want to support my son at his school.”*

*“I found it very difficult to find information for my child and to receive the support needed...it wasn't until I switched schools in SK (to French immersion) did my concerns be addressed.”*

A few respondents provided additional comments of their positive experience with the school and their staff in regards to their initial experience working with TDSB as shown below.

*“All the information was/is provided to us by the school. My child and us as parents have been very well supported by his teachers and principals. They all have been extremely supportive and because of that my child loves his school and I have not heard once in the 5 years of attending school that he didn't want to go. […] This is a call for more effective community and teacher engagement, programs and policies... perhaps not more funding but the same funding delivered in a more effective way.”*

Similar to the recommendations aforementioned, with the lack of available resources, several parent suggested the following:

*“A hand book or guide needs to be printed to outline what to expect and how to go about navigating the system. It is a stressful experience to start with but going in blindly doesn't help either.”*

### TDSB supports

Respondents (n=503) shared more at length of their experience in relation to TDSB support for their child. Akin to what has been said previously, there have been diverse experiences among respondents. Those who shared a positive experience would mention the adequate supports that were provided in a timely manner, supportive and responsive school staff.

*“Everyone from the teachers, principals and TDSB staff members were very helpful and assisted us all the way through. My children are thriving at TDSB schools.”*

In comparison, respondents with mixed experiences, observed changes over time for many reasons including: varying experience amongst their children, different teachers and school administrators, changing schools, change in level of support from elementary to secondary school and an absence of support until further parental involvement or advocacy for their children. Comments similar to below were a common perception voiced by these parents:

*“I am responding to one survey for two children. My child in Gifted has had his needs adequately met through placement in Gifted classes. My child who is not Gifted but who has other needs has been unsupported, despite having an IEP in place.”*

*“Some TDSB were really not helpful at all, and rejected suggestions that were made by my child's therapist, who also works for the TDSB. Other staff were incredibly supportive and helpful, going above and beyond to ensure that my child was having a positive learning experience at school.”*

Finally respondents with negative experiences once again voiced the lack of communication, clarity, follow through and absence of adequate accommodations and supports.

*“Very little communication is provided at the high school level, with very little information from the school or teachers. Some teachers do not want to do the accommodations necessary for the child.”*

*“I have had to fight and push to see the IEP accommodations applied in the class room every single year with multiple teachers across multiple subjects. The teachers rarely take the initiative. If I were not a "squeaky wheel" I seriously wonder if they would ever check the IEPs.”*

## The Individual Education Plan (IEP)

Respondents (n=667) shared comments relating to the level of satisfaction with their experience with the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process at the TDSB. They voiced remarks about communication, the implementation as well as process concerns related to the IEP. Many found the process to be too generic, a difficult process as it was too lengthy and complicated, and was perceived to be positive once when the school staff were committed to support families.

*“The IEP process doesn't begin until nearly November at our school - once 1/3 of the year is already over. There is very little time/advance notice for parents to provide input into the IEP. We often learn about SST meetings (for our child) at the last minute (i.e. within 3 days) making it very difficult to coordinate work/child care arrangements.”*

*“The IEP was tailored to fit my child's needs. The teachers really worked hard in helping my child to accomplish goals and tasks that might have otherwise been unaccomplished.”*

Several respondents also felt a need for a better understanding of the IEP, as they did not always understand the contents. Furthermore, once implemented, many shared concerns regarding the ability of the teacher to follow it due to knowledge, lack of training, the environment, lack of follow through, resources available and the goals were too unstructured, vague, and demonstrates a lack of progress.

 *“Currently satisfied - changed schools this year and things appear to be progressing well. Previous years - I was extremely disappointed, as targets set were not measurable, and several times supports were never implemented.”*

*“The quality of the IEP as a document depends greatly on the diligence and engagement of the individual teacher.”*

*“The IEP was vague, lacked real measurable goals and did not address any concrete skills. When trying to meet with the teacher to discuss his goals she evaded the requests for real reading and math skills and talked about what was in his lunch box. The principal did nothing to correct the matter.”*

*“The IEP process is pretty quick. It's getting the equipment or special classes needed that are still to this day taking too long. And impacting my children's education.”*

*“It has been our experience that it takes up to 1-2 years to finalize the plan going through all the steps which is probably too long to develop such things.”*

## The Identification Placement Review Committee (IPRC) or Special Education Placement Review Committee (SEPRC)

### Respondents’ awareness of the IPRC and SEPRC

Respondents (n=261) indicated their level of awareness of the IPRC and SEPRC. A few stated remarks about not recalling about it, being uncertain, or only recently going through the process, meaning that they were still learning about it. Others also indicated that they know some of the process, or that they knew about IPRC but not SEPRC. Irrespective of their awareness of these processes, respondents shared similar concerns especially pertaining to their experience with the process and communication concerns such as having sufficient information, clarity, and follow through during either the review or with the school. Akin to the IEP process, respondents shared remarks of their experiences varied depending on the staff and the school, which resulted in a combination of positive, mixed and negative experiences.

*“The TDSB did explain about IPRC and SEPRC. They gave the Ministry website and printed out information and staff made themselves available to sit down and explain the process”*

*“The entire process and system of placement should be explained much better to all parents. I knew the process myself. Therefore I was in control. But my friend was forced to sign new placement in a withdrawal classroom with all applied courses without any evidence that her autistic child is not able to function in an academic program.”*

*“We had an SEPRC but no one would explain the difference to me. It took 5 months to set this up, which meant my son losing his year.”*

As a result, many indicated that they also did their own research or found information from other parents, or people in the community including advocates.

*“Basic information was provided by the school - parents have to conduct their own research and find their own resources in order to properly prepare.”*

*“We are aware of IPRC and did request one. The school staff did not explain anything to us; we gathered information from other sources.”*

### Special education placement recommendations by SEPRC

Respondents (n=91) shared comments of their experience with the SEPRC’s recommendations for a special education placement outside of a regular classroom for part or all of the day. Some respondents further elaborated on their opinions and decisions of the SEPRC’s recommendation.

*“I was relieved to learn that my daughter would be amongst peers with an entire staff team and school environment set up for her complex physical, medical, communication and social needs”*

 *“Decline the placement because Gifted programs did not meet the needs of students with multiple exceptionalities.”*

Many respondents indicated that they did both accept and decline the recommendations because it depended on their child, or had varied experiences in different schools.

*“For our 2 children we made different decisions. First [child was] deferred for 6 months, then gifted classroom. For the second, who cannot handle the stress of busing, we kept him at his home school.”*

Several respondents did not share information of their decision with the SEPRC recommendations, but rather, described their experience with the process, with many indicating that they had to initiate it instead of the school.

*“We had to fight to get placement, even though we were in district for the program, despite the SEPRC's perspective. It was a terrible, demoralizing process.”*

Other comments parents shared included only had the IPRC, requiring additional information, are in the process of the SEPRC, and feeling a lack of support from the school.

### IPRC referral process

Irrespective of whether the school arranged for a referral to the IPRC, respondents (n=168) shared additional comments. The majority spoke about the process of getting an IPRC referral with recurring concerns surrounding communication between the school and families, the lengthy delay between initial request and the actual IPRC meeting, which consequently resulted in delayed or an absence of support for their children as expressed below:

*“It took them 3 months to request IPRC for us, after we sent a letter to school. The Sp.Ed department are not in a rush to set up a IPRC for us. It will happen at the end of the year,
so total wait was 1 school year.”*

Many expressed mostly negative experiences and noted much resistance and reluctance from school administrators to arrange it irrespective of having an IPRC arranged. Respondents who were not given a referral also felt largely ignored by the school.

*“They said they would, then we never heard about it again. No checking in. No follow up. It's like unless your kids hurts themselves or other students, or is a runner, they don't want you to do it.”*

Those who were given a referral indicated that the school would arrange it only after formal testing or assessments were completed and the majority expressed that it required much persistence as exemplified by this respondent:

*“I had to force the issue by giving them an official letter requesting the IPRC review, as they did all they could to delay the matter. And when I did provide the official letter (information about the process having to be found online) the principal was reticent to even take the letter.”*

Other comments included: mixed experiences depending on the child or the school, being unaware or unsure, are in the process currently, and a few indicated that it was the school who initiated the process rather than their request.

### Special education placement recommendations by IPRC

98 respondents shared additional comments in regards to the placement recommendations by IPRC. Respondents who accepted the decision largely agreed with the decision. Among them, several also expressed that they felt that they didn't have a choice but to accept. In contrast, rather than appealing the decision, about a quarter of respondents who shared additional comments indicated that they declined for a variety reason including a lack of support, electing to stay in a French program, and a desire to stay in the home school.

*“[We] rejected the placement. As the placement offered was not appropriate and did not meet our child's needs. Decided to stay in regular class with appropriate support”*

A few respondents indicated that there was no decision made yet, as it is still in progress. Similarly to the referral process, some also had mixed experienced depending on the child. Other comments included families that elected to leave the TDSB system, and repeated concerns involving the process time, communication, and school staff.

### Information about services and programs available

Respondents (n=244) shared other comments pertaining to being given enough information about services and programs available to students. Nearly half the respondents indicated that they were provided insufficient information, where many had to seek it through other means, such as doing their own research.

*“Given very little info. Parents need to be given full info in a supportive context, not a big meeting with several TDSB staff.”*

*“I was not given very much information about what would happen in the regular class.[I] was given a bit of info about a special class but nothing specific.”*

While, numerous respondents did not indicate about being provided information, they did share often times that there was a lack of support at their home school and often felt that they had no choice in the decision.

*“We simply had no choice. The local school said they cannot support our son and there was only 1 option offered to us.”*

To a lesser extent, respondents also shared that they already had the information, were given enough information to make a decision, unsure, that the process was still in progress, or that they had mixed experiences among their children. Other comments that were mentioned included their experience through the process, disagreeing with TDSB’s decision and describing the services and programs the students were using.