



Research Report

**MOVING FORWARD: A CALL TO ACTION
SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR IMPROVING
SERVICES AND PROGRAMS, ISSUES AND
RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Robert S. Brown
Research Co-ordinator**

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**Susan Manning, Senior Manager
and General Editor**

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Toronto District School Board
Organizational Development
1 Civic Centre Court, Lower Level
Etobicoke, ON M9C 2B3

Tel.: 416-394-4929

Fax: 416-394-4946

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ISSUE 1: THE REQUIREMENT FOR CLARITY OF SPECIAL NEEDS DEFINITION.....	Pg. 1
RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE REQUIREMENTS FOR CLARITY OF DEFINITIONS	Pg. 4
ISSUE 2: LACK OF QUALITY DATA DUE TO GAPS BETWEEN THE KEY INFORMATION PROVIDERS OF SPECIAL NEEDS.....	Pg. 5
RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE LACK OF DATA QUALITY/GAPS BETWEEN PROVIDERS.....	Pg. 5
ISSUE 3: THE GAP BETWEEN THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SPECIAL NEEDS STRUCTURES	Pg. 6
RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE GAP BETWEEN THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SPECIAL NEEDS	Pg. 7
ISSUE 4: THE NEED FOR EVALUATION	Pg. 7
RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE NEED FOR EVALUATION	Pg. 9

MOVING FORWARD: A CALL TO ACTION SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR IMPROVING SERVICES AND PROGRAMS ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the report *Students with Special Needs in the TDSB 2005-6*, we provided an introduction to a very complex picture: Special Needs as appearing in student records in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Based on the findings of that report, we identified a number of key issues and recommendations based on the current nature of Special Needs information.

The key recommendation: the **'status quo' of Special Needs information is no longer acceptable**. The current structure has developed over many years and decades. Changes in the educational system now necessitate a review and rethink of the Special Education process. *A fundamental first step requires building a common definition of Special Education/Special Needs terms across the TDSB.*

The following four key issues, with recommendations, emerged:

Issue 1: The requirement for clarity of Special Needs definitions

Issue 2: Lack of quality data due to gaps between the key information providers of Special Needs

Issue 3: The gap between the elementary and secondary Special Needs panels

Issue 4: The need for evaluation, including program evaluation, and the need to follow cohorts of Special Needs students through elementary and secondary schools

ISSUE 1: THE REQUIREMENT FOR CLARITY OF SPECIAL NEEDS DEFINITIONS

This research study originated as a request to look at what data was available on Special Needs, and to examine the relationship of Special Needs with academic achievement. While more detailed analysis found data issues, it became apparent that the greatest challenge was in the **multiple definitions** of Special Needs.

These definitions of Special Needs exist concurrently within the TDSB. At the same time, comparatively few are aware of the specifics of any of these definitions, both inside and outside the TDSB. Furthermore, each definition is incomplete in showing the total picture of Special Needs. This provides great opportunities for misinterpretation. Above everything else, the full

picture of TDSB Special Needs should first be clarified and then communicated to the system. Only when this is possible will any other steps be successful.

Some people define Special Needs as applying only to students with one of 14 Exceptionalities (i.e. Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC)) in full-time Special Education classes, (e.g., Gifted, Behavioral). In fact, full-time IPRC'd students make up only a fraction of the total number of all Special Needs students in the TDSB. However, calculating the total of all Special Needs students is problematic, because of these multiple definitions. The overview report, *Special Education / Special Needs Information in the TDSB, 2005-6*, showed some of these differences. However, it is worthwhile noting that there are *five* different sources of Special Needs information:

i. Special Needs information in Section J of the October report to the TDSB (now being provided through the OnSIS process). This is the official reporting process of Special Needs to the Ministry, of students who have Special Education programming – either exceptionalities granted and maintained through the IPRC process, or less formal 'Non-identified' programming.

However, Section J is not commonly distributed internally or externally, and consequently only a comparative few see this information. The table consists of frequencies of each of the exceptionalities organized by male and female and then into type of 'Programming' (fully self-contained, partially integrated, etc.) for a total of over 100 different cells. To obtain percentages requires additional manual calculation by the reader. Section J does not report for all Special Needs students – excluding, for example, over 5,000 students with Individual Education Plan (IEP) receiving direct instruction from the classroom but not officially recognized as Special Education (these students are recognized by EQAO's definitions of Special Needs – see below).

ii. EQAO reporting. This is the most transparent reporting process of Special Needs, in that it is published at the school and TDSB level on EQAO's website (www.eqao.com). This is also incomplete: it looks at students who have an IPRC or IEP designation, but excludes those receiving Special Education instruction but do not have IPRC exceptionalities nor IEP designation (around 3,000 students in 2005-6). The figures may also be modified by the school principal who has information not currently available on the system (in that respect it may be more complete, but inconsistent, with system reporting.) Finally, EQAO reports for Grade 3, 6 and 10 (as well as information for students taking Grade 9 Academic and Applied Math

courses). For these reasons, EQAO data cannot be used to look at the full TDSB system of Special Needs.

iii. Program information in the Enrolment Report. The TDSB reports enrolment for all schools by grade (age at the secondary panel) and includes information on full-time programs. This includes programs in various exceptionalities, but it also includes programs that are unrelated to Special Needs at least in the formal sense (French Immersion, French Extended, Talented). The Home School Program (HSP) is a TDSB program in the elementary panel but is not a Ministry exceptionality – about half the HSP students have an exceptionality but about half do not. Consequently, the programming information in the Enrolment Report is very good at showing what it is supposed to show – the breakdown of full-time programs in each school according to grade. It is not, however, a reporting of Special Needs: It misses about a third of students (7,267 students for 2005-6) who have an IPRC but are not in full-time Special Education. Many IPRC's students are in the Home School Program and hence one cannot find their exceptionality in the enrolment Program variable. Perhaps most importantly, it misses the vast majority of students who have an IEP but no IPRC (13,977 students).

iv. Individual Education Plan(IEP). As noted in the earlier report, the IEP is entered into Trillium by the schools, while Special Education information is entered into Trillium by Special Education staff. There is a discrepancy of about 8,000 students between the two systems – students who had an IEP but no Special Education programming, and students who had Special Education programming but no IEP. Some of these differences are correct, some point to potential data errors.

There is another potential source of IEP information. Teachers are supposed to note whether students have an IEP on each of the subjects in the elementary panel (note that there are five 'subjects' in Math alone, each with the potential of having an IEP). To what degree does this IEP information line up with the information provided directly through Trillium? At this time, it is difficult to say.

v. Secondary students taking Special Education or related courses. The IPRC and IEP process is concentrated in the upper-middle grades in the elementary panel (e.g., only 9% of new IEP's and 10% of new Non-gifted Exceptionalities are in the secondary grades). Consequently, as students progress through the secondary panel, fewer have any formal

Special Needs identification (the proportion decreases from 20% of all Grade 8 students to 14% of all Grade 12 students).

RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE REQUIREMENT FOR CLARITY OF DEFINITIONS

1. It is evident that at this time, any accounting of Special Needs in the TDSB will be incomplete. As seen above, a discussion with five different people about Special Needs may result in five different definitions of Special Needs. Therefore, it is necessary to find a new way to provide information on the range of Special Needs students across the TDSB.
2. Some of the terminology used in reporting Special Needs causes confusion. Thus, in Section J, students who have been identified as having Special Needs programming, but have not been formally IPRC'd, are called "Non-identified" students. To those outside the field, giving one of the key groups of identified students the name of "Non-identified" seems counterintuitive. Clearer terms might reduce some of the confusion.
3. There are many official (IPRC) exceptionalities, and reporting each one by gender results in even more categories. However, the majority of TDSB exceptionalities fall into four exceptionalities: Gifted, LD, MID, and (to a less degree) Behavioral. In general, exceptionalities tend to have more in common with each other than are different from each other; it may be worthwhile to explore in more detail these similarities, with a view of presenting information on either key exceptionalities or perhaps comprehensive groupings of exceptionalities. Continuing to show *all* exceptionalities in detail causes confusion, but *some* information on exceptionalities is needed. Perhaps a compromise may be to provide information on agreed-on key exceptionalities.
4. To carry out these recommendations, a workgroup should be established of key information providers, users of information, and stakeholders, e.g. Special Education central administration, elementary and secondary staff; IT; Research and Information Services; elementary/secondary administrators and teaching staff; communications; etc. See also Recommendation 5 on the next page.

ISSUE 2: LACK OF QUALITY DATA DUE TO GAPS BETWEEN THE KEY INFORMATION PROVIDERS OF SPECIAL NEEDS

There are clear gaps between the key information providers of Special Needs that need to be addressed before good quality data becomes widespread. There are three providers of Special Needs information:

- The Special Education department, which enters information on IPRC and the so-called “Non-identified” student programming;
- The schools, who enter IEP information on Trillium; and
- Elementary teachers, who enter IEP information on individual Report Card subjects.

The three sets of information do not align. This may be one of the possible reasons for the gap between “non-identified” students identified by Special Education, and the IEP data entered by the schools. Without clear responsibility and authority for maintenance of Special Needs information and for the resolution of discrepancies, this gap will continue.

RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE LACK OF DATA QUALITY/GAPS BETWEEN PROVIDERS

5. Co-ordinate the three groups of information providers (Special Education Department, school administrators, and elementary teachers) and key central support staff (e.g., Trillium) through an initial consultative process to examine information gaps and inconsistencies.
6. Develop a formal process for continuously maintaining and verifying Special Needs data as defined through the consultative process (including, but not limited to, the reporting of Section J to the Ministry).
7. Examine in more detail the relationship between the IEP school records, the IEP fields in report cards, and the Special Education identification of ‘non-identified’ students.
8. Develop an internal TDSB audit function for ensuring continuous data quality and data improvement.

ISSUE 3: THE GAP BETWEEN THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SPECIAL NEEDS STRUCTURES

Elementary and secondary Special Education/Special Needs appear to be two separate systems. Most students have IEP and IPRC recognition in the elementary panel (in particular, Grades 3-6). Some new IPRC and IEPs are awarded in the secondary panel but at a greatly reduced rate. Moreover, while most students with valid IPRCs in the elementary panel are in full-time Special Education, most in the secondary panel are in regular programming.

The comparative paucity of new IPRCs and IEPs in the secondary panel in itself would not be problematic, if all TDSB students remained in the system from beginning to end. However, the TDSB has the highest number of recent immigrants of any school board in Ontario. In addition, recent arrivals are more likely to arrive as secondary rather than elementary students. This, coupled with the overall mobility of students in the TDSB, means that older secondary students are much less likely to have the opportunity of formal Special Needs diagnosis, than those in the elementary panel.

Perhaps the lack of opportunity for new IPRC and IEPs in secondary may explain another trend: the proportion of students taking Special Education-related courses, but without any formal Special Needs designation (IPRCs or IEPs) increases, as secondary students get older. It is probably safe to say that the higher the grade in secondary schools, the less the official picture of Special Needs reflects the true picture of students with Special Needs:

- In Grade 9 in 2005-6, 482 or 3% of “regular” students (that is, students without IPRC or IEP designation) had taken at least one Special Education course;
- By Grade 12, 1,849 or 8% of “regular” students had taken at least one Special Education course at one point in their secondary school careers.

Many of these are very ‘high risk’ students. It would seem reasonable that many should be considered Special Needs, and yet these students have no official status of any sort.

In some cases an IPRC designation may be recommended to secondary students (as with elementary students) and the parents refuse the designation. However, new IEPs as well as IPRC’s decline in the secondary panel, and if there was a greater tendency to refuse IPRC designation in the secondary panel, there would be an increase, rather than a decrease, in IEP

designation in secondary. What is happening in secondary is an increasing lack of any official Special Needs designation.

RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE GAP BETWEEN THE ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SPECIAL NEEDS PANELS

9. The transition between elementary and secondary Special Needs should be closely monitored. This examination should include the change of many IPRC'd students from full-time to part-time ('regular') programming, but it should also look at the IEP'd students, and the Special Education 'non-identified' students.
10. There should be an examination of secondary courses with Special Education components with a view to seeing how closely these courses link with the formal Special Needs process.
11. A gap analysis should be undertaken of Grade 11 and 12 Special Needs students to see what current Special Education programming is available, and how this links with secondary curriculum.

ISSUE 4: THE NEED FOR EVALUATION

More effort needs to be focused on the efficacy of Special Education programming. It is very clear that any diagnosis of Special Needs—whether done through the Special Education department or through teacher/school/committee entered IEP, or both – is closely related to student achievement. What is unclear is whether the programming associated with the diagnosis has any long-term effect.

For example, there is no real difference in Grade 10 literacy achievement between Gifted students taking Special Education programming full-time, or those in Regular secondary programming. This is not to say that Special Education programming is ineffective. Rather, there is at this time no consistent, centralized way to determine the effectiveness of this programming.

Related to this is the importance of tracking Special Needs students over time. The status of students changes over time – they change in terms of special needs programming, and, as seen, the Special Needs structures of the TDSB also change as students go from one grade to another. This raises a number of questions:

What happens to students after their Special Needs programming ends? Because of the lack of consistent records there has been limited tracking of these students over time (it is hoped that the Grade 9 cohort of 2005-6 will provide a baseline). The limited information available so far is troubling—students who had previous Special Needs programming (as indicated by historical records) had achievement patterns similar, or below, that of students with some sort of current programming (many of these students are also taking courses with aspects of Special Education).

Students who are Special Needs may change their *formal* status over time, while still remaining a student with Special Needs. A student may first have an IEP, then (or more often, concurrently) have some sort of Special Education assistance (the so-called Non-identified), then after an IPRC process receive full-time Special Education programming, when that changes to part-time status in high school.

Ideally, reasons for change have to do with positive student changes that make the Special Needs recognition unnecessary. However, from the analysis so far, many of these fluctuations over time have more to do with the current structure of Special Education and programming in the TDSB, rather than changes of student needs. That is, the structure of Special Needs in the schools change over time, and the status of the student may change with the structure, rather than due to changes in the student:

- The IPRC process tends to be a second step for students. The first step appears to be IEP/Special Education programming in the earlier primary grades (1-3). Most students are provided with Non-Gifted Exceptionalities only after they have a year or more of IEP recognition (and often Special Education assistance, the so-called 'Non-identified').¹ While we cannot say for certain, it would appear that the IPRC process is thus a more formal recognition of challenges that have already been recognized.

¹ We have found that students who have an IEP but no official Special Education recognition in one year will have this Special Education recognition in another year – and those with Special Education recognition in one year will still have an IEP but no Special Education recognition the next. While some of that may be incomplete/incorrect record-keeping, it may also point to the constantly-changing nature of Special Needs certification

- Likewise, it would appear that about slightly under half the students who had full-time Special Education programming in Grade 8, went into Regular secondary program when they entered Grade 9.

RECOMMENDATIONS AROUND THE NEED FOR EVALUATION

12. It will be necessary to establish a framework for evaluation of Special Education and Special Needs programs and issues.
13. To provide a clear pattern of Special Needs changes and improvements, we need to follow TDSB students from the first primary years to the conclusion of their secondary school studies.
14. It is important to be able to clearly differentiate students who change Special Needs status due to improvement over time, versus those who change Special Needs status due to administrative structures in the organization of TDSB schools. This will obviously take a long time; more limited (although not definitive) multi-year analyses may provide useful information in the interim.
15. The TDSB Special Needs population, and the organization of Special Education/Special Needs, should be compared to other District School Boards inside the province, and with other boards outside Ontario (in other provinces and internationally). At this point, it is difficult to see how the TDSB picture of Special Needs fits with the rest of the province or outside the province.²

² As noted, all current sources are incomplete in one way or another, but at this stage, only EQAO information on certain grades provides some sort of public comparison. Thus, for the 2006-7 OSSTF, students with Special Needs (excluding Gifted) account for 13% of the TDSB's first-time eligible Grade 10 students, which is in fact marginally *lower* than the provincial average of 14%. It is extremely unlikely, given what is known about the TDSB population in general, that the proportion of Special Needs students is below that of the province. However, to see exactly how the undercounting is being done, we need first to clearly define the TDSB picture of Special Needs, and then go outward to see how these different categories compare. This is a difficult, but not impossible, goal for the future