# Report to Toronto District School Board Special Education Advisory Committee

# from SEAC Chair David Lepofsky for the September 12, 2016 TDSB SEAC Meeting

Date: September 6, 2016

By: David Lepofsky, CM., O.Ont,

Chair

Toronto District School Board Special Education Advisory Committee

1. Introduction

I hope everyone had a full and relaxing summer. The time has come for us to roll up our collective sleeves and get back into full swing, as we continue to review the delivery of education services to students with special education needs at the TDSB.

We can be proud that our activity in the first six meetings of this year has resulted in providing TDSB with a detailed list of important, practical and much-needed recommendations for reform. These reforms would positively touch the lives of all the 46,000 students with special education needs at the TDSB.

However, the simple fact that we made these recommendations does not mean that TDSB will implement them. We have much work ahead of us on that front. As well, there are other important aspects of the provision of education to students with special education needs that we need to address, that SEAC's Priorities List adopted one year ago point to, and that our four motions, passed on June 13, 2106, did not address. These include, among other things, a range of concerns that SEAC members have raised over the past months during our jam-packed meetings.

As if that were not enough, we need to take a hard look at the proposed Special Education Plan that TDSB circulated to us earlier this summer. We also need to address TDSB's budget, as it relates to education for students with special education needs.

Here is how I propose that we start to tackle these important issues at our upcoming September 12, 2016 meeting.

2. Next Steps on SEAC's Four Motions Passed on June 13, 2016

I understand that senior TDSB staff have worked this summer on a proposed Equity Plan for TDSB, and that our four motions, passed on June 13, 2016, may be addressed in whole or in part in it. I have been asked to allow for significant time to be available at our September 12, 2016 SEAC meeting to give input into that proposed plan. I have asked TDSB staff to provide us with the proposed plan and any other materials we need to review in advance of our September 12, 2016 meeting. As is our practice at SEAC, we want to use the limited time we have together to discuss. As such, we don't want to wait for that meeting to receive the plans that TDSB staff are bringing forward.

3. TDSB's Duty to Consult SEAC on its Special Education Plan and Its Budget As it Affects Special Education

TDSB is required to annually file a Special Education Plan with the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Ontario regulations that create SEAC require TDSB to consult SEAC on the contents of that plan. TDSB is also required to consult SEAC on its budget as it relates to special education.

As was addressed in a series of emails earlier this summer, TDSB did not consult with SEAC over the past year in the process of developing its Special Education Plan for this year. In mid-summer, it sent SEAC members its proposed revised 177 page Special Education Plan, with a view to getting our input. To assist SEAC members in knowing what changes were made to last year's Special Education Plan, TDSB advised us as follows:

"- All content in black lettering is content from the 2015 Plan. Some of that content may have been moved to new locations within the same section. Some of that content is also moved to or repeated in other sections.

- Anything new is in blue lettering, including “tune-ups” to existing content, to improve clarity or flow.

- Yellow highlighted sections are still in the hands of other departments – such as Transportation and Professional Support Services. I should have those sections returned in advance of the September meeting and will forward them to you when received. I do not anticipate major changes.

- Updates of numerical figures in some sections are still to be done. The analyst who I would obtain the figures from left the department before the end of the year and has not yet been replaced. I should be able to access those numbers during the last week of August and will forward them to you when I have received them."

This 177 page Special Education Plan is far too dense a document for each SEAC member, all volunteers, to be expected to slog through it and come to a meeting to offer comments. I have therefore asked TDSB staff to circulate a document to SEAC members in advance of the September 12, 2016 meeting that explains what is changed in the proposed Special Education Plan and why. This will enable SEAC members to focus on this. I would propose to post any such document from TDSB on the SEAC website, so that the public, including parents of TDSB's 46,000 students with special education needs, can know what we are discussing.

As well, it is open to SEAC members to offer comments on any other part of the Special Education Plan that you wish to offer. We can comment on any part of it, not just the parts that TDSB proposes to change.

Earlier this summer, TDSB sent SEAC members a 12 page document, set out below, entitled:

"SEAC Input to the Special Education Plan" To read this document, one would get the impression that TDSB has approached SEAC throughout the past year to get our input on the Special Education Plan and has actively acted on that input. As I addressed in part earlier this summer in emails with TDSB and SEAC members, I want to make some key points very clear:

\* TDSB never approached us over the past 12 months, before the summer break, to ask for our input into the upcoming year's Special Education Plan.

\* This 12 page document reports remarks made, without attributing who made them, or when they were made. This makes it hard for SEAC members to track through this document, and figure out whether their remarks were correctly presented. I do not for a moment suggest that anyone at TDSB was trying to incorrectly report what was said. However, reading it over myself, it is hard to call up in my memory discussions at 10 prior meetings spread over 12 months, and remember what was said, and in what context.

\* Of greatest importance, it is not realistic, using that 12 page document, to expect our SEAC members to take the time to go through the 177 page draft Special Education Plan and then to figure out where and to what extent SEAC input turned into actual action.Just from a skim of this 12 page document, the listed TDSB action in response to stated SEAC input is vague, mushy and insufficiently informative. I anticipate that SEAC members will be more interested in what concrete changes are actually being made, rather than the internal deliberative processes within the TDSB.

As a result, TDSB needs to develop a new approach to consulting SEAC on the Special Education Plan. This year's experience is unacceptable. Similarly, TDSB needs to develop a proper way to consult SEAC on its budget as it concerns students with special education needs.

I therefore encourage SEAC members, in preparation for our September 12, 2016 meeting, to prepare to bring forward ideas on any of the following topics:

a) Any changes you would suggest to the proposed Special Education Plan, whether or not these arise from changes that TDSB has proposed to make to the previous year's Special Education Plan;

b) Ideas on how TDSB should consult SEAC on its Special Education Plan each year;

c) Ideas on how TDSB should consult SEAC on its budget each year as it affects students with special education needs;

I have asked TDSB staff to bring forward their own ideas on how TDSB could consult SEAC both on the Special Education Plan and on the budget. As part of this, I have asked TDSB staff to canvass other school boards, to learn how others have addressed this. Let's learn from other school boards who do this more effectively than does TDSB.

I want to make it clear that I don't propose our September meeting to be the only time that we will have a chance to have an input on these topics. Rather, we are getting the process started.

I also want to emphasize that from my own perspective, the Special Education Plan is not an end in itself. Rather, it is one vehicle that gives us, as the Special Education Advisory Committee, to have input into how the needs of students with special education needs are actually addressed at TDSB.

At some earlier meetings, TDSB staff have suggested that parents can turn to the Special Education Plan to learn about what options are open for their children at TDSB. For my part, it is not realistic to expect parents to weight through this complex, dense, dry and long document to fish for useful information.

4. TDSB's Approach to Universal Design in Learning (UDL)

At our June SEAC meeting, we had an interesting and informative presentation from TDSB staff member, Bernadette Shaw, Central Coordinating Principal, Teaching and Learning, on the TDSB approach to Universal Design in Learning UDL. I shall ask TDSB if the presenter can return to us at our September meeting, as there was only a short time available for questions and discussion. If we cannot fit this in at our September meeting, I will find time for it later this fall.

5. The Call for an Education Accessibility Standard to Be Developed under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act was passed by the Ontario Legislature in 2005. It requires the Ontario Government to lead Ontario to become fully accessible by 2025.

There has been an effort over the past half decade to get the Ontario Government to agree to develop and enact an Education Accessibility Standard under the AODA to tear down recurring accessibility barriers in Ontario's education system. So far, the Ontario Government has not agreed to create an Education Accessibility Standard.

The AODA Alliance, which I chair, has been in the lead in advocating for the creation of an Education Accessibility Standard. The work of TDSB's SEAC underscores the need for an Education Accessibility Standard. If time permits at this meeting, I wish to briefly update SEAC members on this issue.

6. Correspondence Received

1. Email dated June 28, 2016 from Daphne Boxill, Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) re presenting to SEAC about Educator Access to alternative format books

2. Email dated July 14, 2016 from Michael McNeely re presenting to SEAC about his research and experiences on self-advocacy

3. Fax dated August 30, 2016 from Valerie Gonzalez-Chavez in application to become a SEAC Community Representative for the North West quadrant