
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

4.06—Special Education Grants to School Boards

(Follow-up to VFM Section 3.06, 2001 Annual Report)

BACKGROUND

About 277,000 of the more than 2 million students attending Ontario's publicly funded schools receive special education programs and services. The strengths and needs of students with special education needs vary widely, from gifted at one extreme to those requiring very intensive support at the other.

For the school year ended August 31, 2002, the Ministry of Education provided \$1.37 billion in special education funding to school boards (up from \$1.36 billion in 2000/01). For the 2002/03 school year, it provided about \$1.62 billion. These grants are intended to cover only the incremental costs of providing special needs assistance. The common basic costs of educating all students, including students with special education needs, are covered by other grants. Although the Ministry is ultimately accountable for the quality of Ontario's education system, it relies heavily on school boards as delivery agents to design and deliver quality programs and services to students.

In our 2001 audit, we examined the Ministry's administration and oversight of special education grants and services and visited selected school boards to review and discuss their special education expenditures and service-delivery practices. At that time, we concluded that neither the school boards we visited nor the Ministry, which was in the process of implementing a multi-year plan to strengthen accountability for special education grants and services, had the information and processes in place to determine whether special education services were being delivered effectively, efficiently, and in compliance with requirements. Our observations included the following:

- Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that we had reviewed did not meet either regulatory requirements or ministry expectations. IEPs are essential if each student is to receive the special education he or she requires.
- Neither the Ministry nor the boards had established quality assurance processes to ensure that suitable programs and services were being delivered to students with special education needs.
- School boards did not collect and report sufficient, appropriate information on their special education expenditures and service delivery to support decision-making by school-board management and to enable effective oversight by the Ministry, trustees, and parents.

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- Many educators expressed concerns about insufficient numbers of teacher assistants and special education resource teachers to help them meet the needs of their students.

We had also reviewed the status of the 15 recommendations made in 1994 by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts as a result of our previous audit of special education programs and services. The Ministry had implemented four, was making progress on implementing six, and had not addressed five.

We made a number of recommendations for improvement and received commitments from the Ministry that it would take corrective action.

CURRENT STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

For several years the Ministry has been introducing major changes to Ontario's education system that are intended to improve its equity, quality, efficiency, and accountability. Many of these changes, such as the new curriculum, provincial report card, and provincial testing, are intended to benefit all students. The most significant changes aimed specifically at programs and services provided to students with special education needs began to be implemented in 1998. For example, standards for the preparation of Individual Education Plans and for the public reporting of school-board Special Education Plans were provided to school boards in 2000. As well, initiatives to set standards for the administration and delivery of special education programs and services were announced in January 2000 and were planned for completion by the end of 2002.

As of June 2003, although the Ministry has made progress, the completion of a number of major initiatives currently underway is needed before the Ministry and school boards will have assurance that special education funds are being spent in accordance with ministry expectations and students with special education needs are getting the programs and services they need.

We also reviewed the status of recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts in 1994 and noted that significant progress in addressing the Committee's recommendations had been made since our 2001 audit.

The status of each of our 2001 recommendations is outlined below.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

Compliance with Guidelines and Standards

Recommendation

To help ensure that the services students need to make satisfactory progress are timely and appropriate and that school boards comply with legislation, regulations, and policies, the Ministry should:

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- *use the results of their planned compliance-verification work to provide boards with examples of successful practices for timely and effective preparation of Individual Education Plans; and*
 - *require school boards to establish compliance-monitoring procedures and report the results of their work.*

Current Status

The Ministry has substantially implemented the first part of this recommendation. Since our audit the Ministry has completed compliance reviews of a sample of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in each of the province's 72 school boards. Based on the results of the reviews conducted at the first 50 boards, the Ministry issued, in September 2002, further guidance to clarify certain requirements that were not being met by the boards and developed and distributed a template to assist boards to meet ministry expectations more effectively and consistently.

The second part of this recommendation remained to be implemented and is of continuing concern given the results of the Ministry's compliance reviews. The results of the 72 completed reviews were consistent with our findings in 2001. According to the letter that the Ministry sent to all school boards in June 2003, which summarized the 2003 review results for the remaining 22 boards, "the greatest concern continues to be that many IEPs do not effectively describe educational programming which is clearly connected to the Ontario curriculum." The Ministry also found, for example, that many IEPs lacked specificity in a number of areas, such as program goals, strategies, assessment methods, accommodations, and the specific knowledge and skills to be assessed each term; that most IEPs reviewed did not clearly demonstrate that parent/student consultation had actually occurred; and that inappropriate use of terms in most IEPs reviewed resulted in an inability to communicate the connections between a student's IEP and subsequent report card.

Although the Ministry already requires school boards to develop a plan and to publicly report on how they will comply with the Ministry's requirements for IEPs, the Ministry was planning to issue more specific policy directives to school boards regarding quality assurance mechanisms for IEPs in fall 2003.

Supporting Service Decisions

Recommendation

To help ensure that educators have the information they need to determine how to best meet the needs of students and to help parents assess the adequacy of services and supports, the Ministry should require boards to summarize the rationale for key service decisions in Individual Education Plans and provide explanations for cases in which planned progress has not been achieved.

Current Status

The Ministry was still in the process of implementing this recommendation. The Ministry requires that school boards include information that would support service decisions, such as assessment results, in Individual Education Plans (IEPs); however, according to the Ministry's compliance review results, these requirements were not being met by school boards. This recommendation will not be fully implemented until the Ministry determines that all boards have established effective quality assurance mechanisms for their IEPs in accordance with our first recommendation.

Reporting on Student Progress

Recommendation

To help ensure that all parents are provided with clear reports on their children's progress, the Ministry should provide boards with examples of good practice in reporting the progress of students working towards modified learning expectations.

Current Status

The Ministry was in the process of implementing this recommendation. The additional guidance provided to school boards in September 2002 clarified requirements for clearly articulating goals and modified learning expectations for students. However, practical examples of good practice had not been provided to boards, and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) reviewed in 2003 still did not meet ministry expectations in this regard. The Ministry communicated to Directors of Education in June 2003 that it intends to develop and distribute further resource supports through the revision of *Special Education: A Guide for Educators (Part E)* and through samples of completed IEPs. These supports are to be made available for use during the 2003/04 school year. While every IEP is individualized, samples of well-completed IEPs will support better completion of individual IEPs that will serve as an instrument to help measure a student's progress.

PROGRAM QUALITY STANDARDS AND ASSURANCE

Delivering the Individual Education Plan and Early Identification of Student Needs

Recommendation

To help ensure that students receive timely and effective programs and services in accordance with ministry program standards and expectations, the Ministry should:

- *require and assist boards to implement quality-assurance information systems and procedures for their special education and early intervention programs and services;*
- and*

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- *periodically assess whether the systems and procedures established by boards are working as intended.*

Current Status

The Ministry did not yet have any information on the extent to which school boards had taken action to collect better information on their special education programs and services and how well they were working. Any improvements may be evident in the Special Education Plans that school boards are required to prepare and make publicly available every other year, but updated plans were not due from the boards until July 31, 2003.

Since our audit, the Ministry has introduced an early reading and early math strategy to further support school boards to identify and assist, as soon as possible, students who are having difficulties in reading and math. The Ministry has also contracted with the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario to develop and pilot a screening tool and targeted interventions for children in Kindergarten and Grade 1, to be used by teachers to identify and address reduced readiness to learn. Twenty school boards were involved in a pilot that concluded in June 2003. The project focused on reading and social readiness. A math readiness tool is to be developed in this fiscal year. The Ministry intends to review the results of the pilot and make any necessary amendments before releasing the screening tool and targeted interventions more widely. This project complements the Ministry's Early Math and Early Reading initiatives.

One of the major reforms the Ministry announced in January 2000 was the intention to develop program standards in order to achieve consistent quality in the special education programs and services delivered by school boards. The Ministry had planned to have standards for all 12 exceptionalities developed and released by 2003. In May 2003, the Ministry released proposed program standards that would apply to the planning and delivery of special education programs for all exceptional pupils.

In addition, the Ministry has initiated a pilot project involving 10 school boards (English and French, public and Catholic, representing all regions of the province) to field test the standards-based approach to the planning and delivery of special education, using the autism-specific standards as a vehicle for this test. The pilot project is intended to identify the key activities and changes that are needed to ensure quality improvement in program and service delivery and to support effective implementation of all program standards. Program standards will not be finalized and released until the pilot project has been completed and evaluated.

Tracking Student Achievement and Outcomes

Recommendation

To help ensure that the Ministry and school boards can evaluate the effectiveness of special education programs and services, the Ministry should:

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- *require school boards to summarize the progress made by students with special needs relative to planned expectations and to report board-wide results on the extent to which expectations were met; and*
 - *establish procedures to collect information on the post-school outcomes of students with special needs and report this information at both the school board and the provincial level.*

Current Status

Given the weaknesses in Individual Education Plans that the Ministry's compliance review process identified, little progress had been made on implementing this recommendation. The school boards that the Ministry reviewed were not capable of summarizing the progress being made by their students with special education needs either individually or collectively.

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) has provided school boards with performance results on the 2002 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (both the February and October applications) for their students with special education needs. These data include exceptionality-specific results and data related to exemptions, deferrals, and type/frequency of accommodations. A provincial roll-up and presentation of these data were provided to the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education following the release of the results to school boards and were used to help the Ministry's At Risk Working Group to form its recommendations. These recommendations address issues of achievement for students at risk of failure in school, including students with special education needs, and were being implemented at the time of our follow-up.

The EQAO has also expanded its guidance to educators who administer provincial assessments. This guidance may make these assessments more useful for tracking the progress of students with special education needs, provided that the results can be segregated into the proportion of students with special education needs in each school board and school who:

- are working towards the Ontario curriculum learning expectations for their grade and are identified as special needs only because they require certain accommodations;
- are working towards modified learning expectations in one or more subjects/courses; and
- are exempted from the assessments, including the proportion who are working towards alternative expectations to the Ontario curriculum.

According to the Ministry, a number of the Special Education Advisory Committees of district school boards have used the data from EQAO tests relating to students with special education needs as the basis for discussions about the students' performance.

As further support to our recommendation, in September 2002, the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education recommended that the Ministry invest in applied special education research in order to develop the capacity of school boards for cost-effective programming and planning. The Council concluded that "efficient and effective use of

resources cannot be achieved unless school boards have access to research that demonstrates how programming can be delivered for maximum impact.”

By September 2003, the Ministry plans to have assigned a unique Ontario Education Number to each student that, together with other information systems projects underway, will help facilitate the collection of data on the progress and outcomes of all students, including those with special education needs, as well as the analysis of board-by-board achievement and change.

Provision of Professional Services

Recommendation

To help ensure that students with special needs have available to them, in accordance with the Education Act and regulations, appropriate professional services regardless of the area of the province in which they reside, the Ministry should:

- *require that boards collect and report complete service-backlog information; and*
- *resolve the co-ordination of services issue with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.*

Current Status

The Ministry was in the process of implementing this recommendation. School boards are required to include service-backlog information in their Special Education Plans but, as stated earlier, these plans are not due until July 31, 2003. Therefore, the Ministry will not know the extent of service backlogs until those plans are received and analyzed.

The Ministry did provide school boards with \$10 million of additional funding, to be spent by March 31, 2003, for reducing or eliminating any backlog in professional assessments their students required. The funding was to be used first to assess high-need students who may qualify for additional funding for support and other resources.

In March 2002, the Ministry established a Coordinated Services Advisory Committee that, in turn, has established several working groups to address specific services for children with special education needs, such as planning for entry to school, speech-language services, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychosocial services, and adaptive technology. Representation on the Committee includes individuals from other affected ministries, key health service areas, school boards, and parent groups. A recent focus has been on establishing performance indicators for a co-ordinated services approach that will permit the Ministry to monitor the impact of process improvements while giving school boards the flexibility to adapt approaches to local circumstances.

MANAGING PLACEMENT AND CLASS COMPOSITION

Recommendation

To help support resource allocation decisions and assist trustees and the Ministry to monitor the classroom support available to teachers and students, the Ministry should:

- *require that boards collect and report information on class composition and the support resources available for each school; and*
- *analyze the information to determine how pervasive support or composition problems are and take corrective action where necessary.*

Current Status

The Ministry only recently began to implement this recommendation. In January 2003, the Ministry launched the Special Education Data Project to address concerns about the reliability and usefulness of information being reported by school boards. The project is examining: the relevance of data currently collected to ministry decision-making and accountability for special education, the gaps and overlaps between data sources, and the comparability of data between the various school boards. One of the project's objectives is to improve the organization, quality, and comparability of the Ministry's information on special education students, staff, programs, and services. The Ministry expects to have recommendations by fall 2003 and to implement new or revised data requirements in time to start collecting information for the 2004/05 school year.

PLANNING AND OVERSIGHT OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Recommendation

To help ensure that school-board special education programs and services are effective and to enable the Ministry to obtain assurance of that effectiveness, the Ministry should improve its standards for special education plans to include the requirements that:

- *trustees, with the advice of Special Education Advisory Committees, establish service-delivery objectives for management;*
- *management report annually on the extent to which service-delivery objectives have been achieved and on any necessary corrective action; and*
- *boards have systems and procedures to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information presented in the plans and management reports.*

Current Status

The Ministry decided to delay action on this recommendation until it had reviewed the school-board Special Education Plans due in 2003. The Ministry's Standards for School

Boards' Special Education Plans were issued in September 2000 and became effective for the submission of boards' plans in 2001. The next set of board plans were not due to the Ministry until July 31, 2003. Once an analysis of the school boards' Special Education Plans is completed, the Ministry was planning to seek advice from the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education regarding changes to the standards for future submissions.

TEACHER PREPAREDNESS

Recommendation

To help ensure that teachers are well prepared to meet the needs of students with special needs, the Ministry should:

- *work with applicable stakeholders to review the pre-service practical experience and special education course content requirements for certifying teachers and ensure that they reflect best practices in preparing teachers for their responsibilities; and*
- *investigate the feasibility of providing a cost-effective, Web-based reference facility for educators and of acquiring or developing age-appropriate instructional materials.*

Current Status

Significant progress has been made on this recommendation. The Ontario College of Teachers has completed regulatory revisions to the special education component of pre-service programs that are intended to ensure that all certified teachers have training in instructional strategies designed to meet the individual needs of students, including students with behaviour, communication, intellectual, physical, or multiple exceptionalities. Although the revised regulation has not yet been passed, some faculties of education have already introduced new pre-service experience requirements for special education into their teacher training programs. The new qualifying test for teachers also includes content on teaching students with special education needs.

In addition, on December 12, 2002, the Ontario College of Teachers was granted regulatory authority to accredit teacher education programs. Accreditation is intended to ensure more consistent quality and adherence to professional standards by institutions offering such programs.

The College has also completed major revisions to the additional qualification courses teachers must take as part of their new five-year mandatory professional learning program beginning in 2003, and special education courses are being significantly expanded as part of this initiative.

Also in 2003, the Ministry released an updated CD-ROM version of the Curriculum Unit Planner for teachers that includes a Special Education Companion. The Companion includes sample teaching strategies, suggestions, and accommodations for most exceptionalities, together with Internet links to Web-based information and resources.

FUNDING FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

Recommendation

To strengthen the ability of trustees, Special Education Advisory Committees, parents, and the Ministry to hold school-board administrators accountable for spending special education funds in a cost-effective manner and to strengthen the Ministry's ability to ensure the adequacy and equity of the special education funding formula, the Ministry should:

- *require that boards report the full cost of special education by major activities and functions and establish standards to ensure that the reported information is comparable across boards;*
- *obtain assurance regarding the reliability of the reports; and*
- *analyze the reported information, determine the reasons for any significant inconsistencies in expenditures, and take action where appropriate.*

Current Status

The Ministry was in the process of implementing this recommendation. The Ministry concluded its process for validating the number of high-needs students requiring intensive supports in each school board, and final funding adjustments had been made.

As part of the Special Education Data Project already noted, the Ministry worked with school boards to resolve issues relating to the reliability and comparability of expenditure data. In April 2003, it issued new special education expenditure reporting instructions to school boards that clarify special education expenditure information requirements and definitions. The new requirements apply beginning with the 2003/04 school year. Consequently, the Ministry will not have more reliable and comparable information on school boards' special education expenditures until fall 2004. Efforts to obtain program and activity level expenditure data will take even longer as many school boards do not have the necessary systems in place to provide such data.