

Chapter 3

Section

3.14

Special Education

Background

Under the *Education Act*, the Ministry of Education (Ministry) has overall responsibility for the development of legislation, regulations, and policies for the provision of special education programs and services to students with special education needs. The province's 72 publicly funded school boards are responsible for delivering these programs and services in accordance with ministry requirements.

The *Education Act* defines a student with special education needs as one who requires placement in a special education program because he or she has one or more special behavioural, communicative, intellectual, or physical needs. School boards determine whether students have special needs, and, if so, they identify their strengths and needs and recommend the appropriate placements. As can be seen from Figure 1, the most common categories of special needs are learning disability, giftedness, and mild intellectual disability.

The Ministry bases its special education policies and regulations on the principle that placing students with special education needs in regular classrooms should be the normal practice when it meets the students' needs and parents agree to it. However, school boards may place a student in special education classes if this better meets his or her needs and is supported by the parents.

Figure 1: Special Education Enrolment by Area of Special Need in Publicly Funded Schools, 2006/07

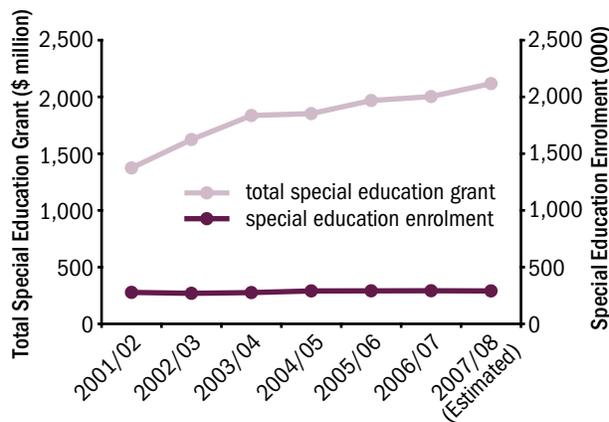
Source of data: Ministry of Education

Type of Special Need	#	%
learning disability	84,556	28.98
mild intellectual disability	23,718	8.13
behaviour	13,743	4.71
language impairment	11,769	4.03
developmental disability	10,406	3.57
multiple exceptionalities	9,557	3.28
autism	9,357	3.21
physical disability	3,598	1.23
hearing (deaf and hard of hearing)	2,416	0.83
vision (blind and low vision)	771	0.26
speech impairment	638	0.22
hearing and vision (deaf and deaf-blind alternative programs)	43	0.01
Total Excluding Giftedness	170,572	58.46
giftedness	26,609	9.12
Total Identified Students	197,181	67.58
non-identified students receiving special education services	94,583	32.42
Total Students Receiving Special Education Services	291,764	100.00

Special education grants are a significant component of school board funding, amounting to \$2.1 billion or over 12% of annual operating grants. Figure 2 shows that since the 2001/02 school year, special education grants have increased by 54%, which raised these grants from 10.6% to 12.3% of

Figure 2: Special Education Grant and Enrolment, 2001/02–2007/08

Source of data: Ministry of Education



total operating grants to school boards. The figure also shows that the number of students receiving special education services grew little over this period, increasing from 277,000 to 290,000 students, or about 5%.

Audit Objective and Scope

Our audit objective was to assess whether the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and selected school boards had adequate procedures for:

- assessing the extent to which special education programs and services met the needs of students with special education needs; and
- ensuring that programs and services complied with legislation, regulations, and policies regarding special education and were delivered economically and efficiently.

The scope of our work included examining the Ministry's systems and procedures for overseeing the delivery of special education programs and services by school boards, and visiting three school boards (Toronto District School Board, Simcoe County District School Board, and Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board) to review their delivery of special education programs and services

at a sample of their schools. The criteria we used to address our audit objective were agreed to by senior management at the Ministry and the school boards that we visited.

During our audit we interviewed staff and reviewed documentation from the Ministry's Strategic Planning and Elementary/Secondary Programs Division, the Instruction and Leadership Development Division, and the Elementary/Secondary Business and Finance Division. At the three school boards we interviewed principals, special education teachers, classroom teachers, and supervisory staff, and reviewed the documentation related to services provided to a sample of students with special education needs. We also met with a psychologist and several members of one board's Special Education Advisory Committee. In addition, a number of parents volunteered to answer a brief questionnaire, and we received comments from other members of the public.

Our audit did not look at programs for gifted students, as their needs are very different from those of other students with special education needs. Our scope also excluded programs for children and youth in non-school settings: care and treatment, custody, and correctional facilities.

Summary

While the Ministry of Education (Ministry) has increased special education funding since the 2001/02 school year by 54%, the number of students served increased by only about 5%. Although provincial test results and our audit indicated that progress has been made since our last audit in 2001, there are still a number of areas where practices need to be improved to ensure that the significant funding increases result in continuous improvement in the outcomes for students with special education needs in Ontario.

Some of our more significant observations are as follows:

- The proportion of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in our sample completed by the due date improved from 17% in our 2001 audit to almost 50% in this audit. The availability of information from student information systems has also improved since our last audit, and a number of information system initiatives were under way at the time of our audit. However, the information that school boards currently collect about students with special education needs, how early they are identified, the educational programs provided to them, and the results achieved was not yet sufficient to support effective planning and service delivery, program oversight, and the identification of effective practices.
- The IEPs that we examined varied in quality with respect to setting the learning goals and expectations for students with special education needs working toward modified curriculum expectations. The learning goals and learning expectations for numeracy and literacy were generally measurable. However, the goals and expectations for other subjects were often vague. As a result, schools could not measure the gap between the performance of students with special education needs and regular curriculum expectations and assess whether the change in the performance gap between reporting periods was appropriate in the circumstances.
- Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs) make significant decisions regarding the education of students with special education needs, but do not adequately document the rationale for their decisions and the evidence they relied on. As a result, information that would be of use to IPRCs conducting annual reviews and to teachers in connection with the preparation of IEPs is not available. The lack of detailed information on the proceedings also limits the ability of boards to identify areas for systemic improvement in IPRC procedures.
- School boards did not have sufficient evidence to demonstrate compliance with the requirement in Regulation 181/98 of the *Education Act* to consult with parents in connection with IPRCs and in the preparation of IEPs. We also found that the Ministry's expectations in this regard were not sufficiently detailed.
- The process for formally identifying students with special education needs—including IPRC meetings and professional assessments—is resource intensive. One school board we audited conducted fewer formal assessments to help offset the cost of additional special education teachers. The Ministry needs to compare the contribution to student outcomes made by the formal identification process to that made by additional direct services provided by special education teachers and identify the strategy that results in the greater benefits to students.
- The provincial report card is not designed to report on the achievement of the various learning expectations in the IEPs of students who are being assessed against modified and alternative learning expectations, and on the extent to which students with special education needs have met their learning goals. As a result, parents and students were not adequately informed about the performance of students who were being assessed against modified and alternative expectations.
- We found examples, particularly at the elementary school level, where report cards discussed the student's positive attributes but did not provide a candid discussion of the student's performance relative to expectations. As a result, some parents may not fully understand their child's rate of progress and areas for improvement.
- The required planning form for the transition from secondary school to work, community living, or further education was being completed by schools. However, there was no documentation on whether the actions

noted on the planning form were completed and with what degree of success. There was also no documentation on the work done by schools to manage the transition of students with special education needs from school to school and from elementary to secondary school.

- The Ministry does not require that school boards establish procedures to assess the quality of the special education services and supports at their schools and whether the schools complied with legislation, regulations, and policies. None of the school boards we audited had established such procedures.

Detailed Audit Observations

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE OUR LAST AUDIT

The Ministry revised the structure of special education grants following our audit in 2001. At that time, funding consisted of the special education per pupil amount (SEPPA), which was based on each school board's total enrolment, plus four components that boards obtained by submitting claims to the Ministry, as follows:

- The intensive support amount 1 (ISA 1) funded purchases of assistive equipment.
- ISA 2 and ISA 3 funded the additional cost of services and supports for high needs students.
- The special incidence portion (SIP) funded the additional cost of services and supports for the few extremely high needs students.
- ISA 4 funded the cost of services and supports for children and youth in non-school settings: care and treatment, custody, and correctional facilities.

The ISA 2 and 3 components were criticized by school boards and parents. School boards complained of the time-consuming claims process. Parents complained because these components gave school boards the financial incentive to develop

what were in their view overly negative profiles of their children. As a result, starting in the 2004/05 school year, the Ministry converted the ISA 2 and 3 components to the high needs amount (HNA) component that, like SEPPA, is based on each board's total enrolment. These two components accounted for \$1.95 billion of the \$2.12 billion special education grant provided to boards in 2007/08. The ISA 1 component (renamed the special equipment amount), the ISA 4 component (renamed the facilities amount), and the SIP component continue to be claims-based.

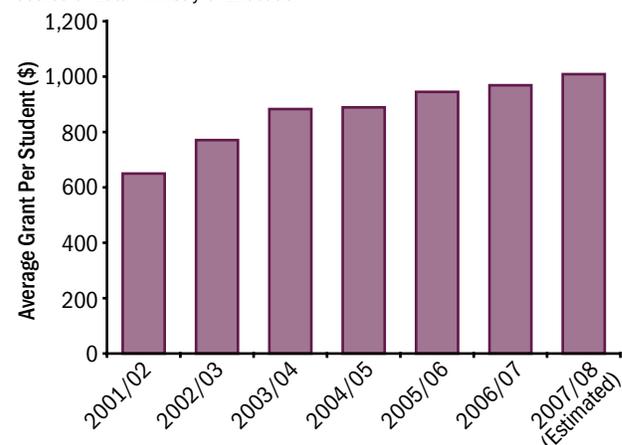
Although enrolment at the province's school boards has been declining since 2002/03, the SEPPA and HNA components to boards have been increasing. This is due to the fact that, as Figure 3 shows, the average of these components per pupil has risen from the equivalent of \$650 in 2001/02 to an estimated \$1,009 in 2007/08.

Since our 2001 audit of special education grants to school boards, the Ministry has initiated two reviews of special education:

- In August 2005 the Ministry published *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students With Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. The Ministry advised us that the report is being updated so that it addresses kindergarten to grade 12.

Figure 3: Grants Based on Total Enrolment (SEPPA and HNA)

Source of data: Ministry of Education



- In May 2006 the Ministry published *Special Education Transformation: The Report of the Co-Chairs with the Recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education*.

In response to the Expert Panel's report, the Ministry allocated \$25 million to the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) in each of 2005/06 and 2006/07 for projects to support the implementation of the Expert Panel's 10 recommendations. CODE's October 2006 report on its activities indicated that every board in Ontario received funding to implement special education projects. The 2007 report stated that the 2006/07 project design was "developed directly from the lessons learned during the initial year of implementation"; the project examined how educators learn professionally and improve their teaching practices, since "there will not be sustainable gains in student achievement or school improvement without improvement in teaching."

CODE also collected data and interviewed school board personnel regarding the outcomes

of the projects at each board. The October 2006 interim report noted positive changes, such as:

- an increase from 2% to 29% in the percentage of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) who performed at levels 3 and 4 (4 being the highest level) at one school board; and
- an increase in the success rate on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test of students who need assistive technology. A training project on the use of assistive technology was conducted in four of the 10 secondary schools at one school board. The success rate of students who needed assistive technology to write tests was 63% at these four schools, compared to 41% at the board's other six secondary schools.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the Education Quality and Accountability Office reports indicated that the achievement of students with special education needs on provincial tests has steadily improved since 2002.

Figure 4: Performance of Students with Special Education Needs (Excluding Gifted) on Provincial Tests

Source of data: Education Quality and Accountability Office reports

Type of Special Need	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Percentage at or above the Provincial Standard on Grade 3, 6, and 9 Tests						
Grade 3						
reading	16	19	18	21	22	25
writing	14	15	16	19	20	37
mathematics	27	31	29	31	35	35
Grade 6						
reading	16	17	19	22	24	27
writing	12	11	14	17	17	28
mathematics	18	20	21	21	21	23
Grade 9 Mathematics						
academic	50	50	52	58	57	63
applied	15	18	19	28	28	27
Percentage Successful on Literacy Test						
Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test	37 ¹	46 ¹	57 ¹	55 ²	53 ²	52 ²

1. result as of October of the school year

2. result as of March of the school year

IDENTIFICATION AND PLACEMENT

The *Education Act* defines an exceptional child as one who requires placement in a special education program owing to his or her behavioural, communicative, intellectual, or physical needs, or multiple exceptionalities. The Ministry of Education has provided definitions for Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs) to use in formally identifying exceptional students, as shown in Figure 1. Regulation 181/98 requires school boards to establish IPRCs to determine whether students are exceptional and, if so, in what ways they are exceptional. IPRCs consist of three or more persons, one of whom must be a principal or a supervisory officer employed by the board. IPRCs may consider reports from teachers, psychologists, and/or other professionals who have assessed the students. When IPRCs decide that a student is exceptional, they must also identify his or her strengths and needs, recommend the appropriate placement, and review these decisions annually unless the parents agree to waive the annual review by the IPRC.

Figure 1 also shows that almost one-third of students receiving special education services have not been formally identified. This is because, in some cases, a school may start to provide special education programs and services to a student before formal identification has been completed; in other cases, parents may decide that they do not want their child labelled as exceptional; or parents and the school may agree that formal identification is unnecessary since the current special education program is meeting the student's needs.

Timely Intervention

Regulation 181/98 of the *Education Act* in conjunction with the Ministry's Policy/Program Memorandum 11 requires school boards to have procedures in place to identify and respond to students' learning needs. At the school boards we audited, the process for addressing the needs of students who are not meeting curriculum expectations and are

not responding to extra help from classroom teachers can be broadly described as follows:

- Classroom teachers or special education teachers administer diagnostic tests to identify a student's specific areas of need, such as verbal or reading comprehension, and assist teachers in determining what adjustments to make to their strategies for helping the students to progress.
- If these strategies are not successful, the student is referred to an in-school support team, which reviews each case and recommends appropriate action that may include preparation of a formal plan for the student's education referred to in the Regulation as an Individual Education Plan (IEP). In addition to special education teachers, support teams may include school administrators and other in-school professionals employed by the board, such as psychologists.
- If there is still no improvement in the student's performance, the support team recommends to the principal and parents that the student be referred to the school board's professional support staff for detailed assessments of his or her strengths and needs. These assessments assist teachers in developing IEPs and principals in deciding whether students should be referred to IPRCs.

Although the Ministry and the boards we audited agreed that the early identification of a student's special needs is important, they had not established timelines in this regard to monitor whether their early identification procedures were effective. We recognize that, owing to the many variations in student circumstances, needs, and development, there are cases where the identification of a student's special education needs later than usual is unavoidable. However, in other cases, late identifications may be the result of inadequate early identification procedures at a school that should be reviewed by board management and corrected.

Setting target timelines for the identification of special education needs provides the basis for

reporting exceptions to administrators. This enables them to focus their attention on those few cases that are most likely to be the result of procedural problems and more easily identify cases where corrective action should be taken.

In the absence of ministry or board targets, we used as our audit criterion that students with special education needs who had started school at the board by the beginning of grade 1, should normally have their first IEP by the end of grade 4. For those students in our sample who started school at the boards by the beginning of grade 1, we found that 89% received their first IEP by the end of grade 4 or their file contained information that indicated why they were late. However, 11% did not, and there was no information in the student's file as to why this was the case. If the Ministry and boards were to determine that this was an appropriate criterion, we would expect to see, as student information systems are enhanced, these cases reported to administrators, sorted by school, to enable them to review the early identification procedures and, if required, take corrective action at schools that have not been effective at early identification.

We also found cases that indicated that procedures for identifying special education needs for English-language learners (ELL) may need to be improved. For example, a student who had been receiving ELL support from grade 1 onward was still failing both language and mathematics and was performing poorly in other subjects in grade 5. The student received his first IEP in grade 6. In grade 8 an IPRC determined that the student had special needs and he was placed in a special education class. He was transferred to secondary school at the end of grade 8; however, he did not accumulate any credits in his first year at secondary school.

RECOMMENDATION 1

To ensure that students with special education needs are identified in a timely manner, the Ministry of Education should work with school boards to establish procedures to monitor the effectiveness of schools' early identification

practices and take corrective action where they have not been effective.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will work with boards to identify an appropriate period of assessment leading to the identification of student needs. This work will build on recent ministry work with the Ontario Psychological Association and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario's Web Based Teaching Tool.

Documenting IPRC Proceedings

IPRCs make decisions that have a significant impact on students' educational programs. Their decision process is complex and requires consideration of a number of factors and reports.

It is common practice in most organizations to document discussions at meetings where important decisions are made. Such records, including reports submitted to and relied on by the committees concerned, support accountability for decisions, enable processes to be reviewed and improved, and assist future committees in understanding past decisions. However, Regulation 181/98 does not require IPRCs to fully document their proceedings, and none of the school boards we audited did so. Instead, the Regulation requires IPRCs to document only their decisions regarding a student's:

- exceptionalities, if any;
- placement and, if they decide to place the student in a special education class full-time, their reasons for doing so; and
- strengths and needs.

As a result, the statements of decision that IPRCs prepared for the students in our sample provided little information that would be of use to teachers. They were also insufficient to facilitate the review and improvement of IPRC procedures or to assist subsequent IPRCs in understanding past decisions—Regulation 181/98 requires boards to

hold annual reviews by IPRCs to reassess the placement and identification decisions made by previous IPRCs, unless a waiver is signed by the parents. Since the composition of the original IPRCs and the IPRCs conducting annual reviews is usually different, adequate records of meetings would assist IPRCs conducting annual reviews in understanding past decisions. For example:

- Our sample included cases where the original IPRC decision regarding a student's exceptionality was not consistent with other information in the student's file. Without a record of the evidence relied on in making these decisions and their rationale, the reasons for these inconsistencies and whether changes in procedures were necessary could not be determined.
- A typical reason for placing a student in a special education class was that the student needed extensive modification of the curriculum. There was no elaboration on what the IPRC considered to be extensive modification, and no description of the supports and services needed by the student that could not reasonably be provided in a regular classroom.

We also noted that in some cases IPRCs did not follow the Ministry's IEP guide with respect to documenting strengths and needs. The guide's examples make clear that the strengths to be recorded are those that can be incorporated into individual education plans to assist students in making further and/or faster academic progress than they might otherwise have made. However, we found several instances where IPRC members appeared to be unsure about what to record as strengths and noted characteristics that had little value for instructional purposes, such as "affectionate," "eager to please," and "responds to praise."

RECOMMENDATION 2

To help ensure that Identification, Placement, and Review Committees (IPRCs) provide information that is useful to teachers, assists subse-

quent IPRCs in understanding past decisions, and facilitates the review and improvement of procedures, the Ministry of Education should require IPRCs to properly document their proceedings, including:

- the rationale for their decisions and a record of the evidence that was submitted to the IPRCs and the evidence the IPRCs relied on in reaching each of their decisions regarding exceptionalities, placement, and strengths and needs; and
- in the event that they decide to place a student in a special education class, a description of the supports and services needed by the student that could not reasonably be provided in a regular classroom.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will work with school boards to improve the documentation of the IPRC process to support communication with parents, students, and relevant systems.

Parental Involvement in the IPRC Process

Regulation 181/98 requires school boards to provide parents with a Parents' Guide explaining the IPRC process. In addition, the Ministry's Special Education Guide for educators recommends that a staff member meet with parents before the IPRC meeting to discuss the IPRC process and to answer any questions. The Special Education Guide also suggests that IPRCs consider any information about the student submitted by parents, and that IPRCs encourage parents and students to ask questions and participate in IPRC meetings.

However, the majority of the files we examined did not contain evidence that the schools had sent a Parents' Guide to parents in advance of the original IPRC meetings. None of the files we examined contained evidence that a staff member had met with parents before the IPRC meeting or had attempted

to arrange such a meeting. In the absence of documentation, we could not determine whether the members of the IPRC had encouraged parents and students to participate in the discussions at the meeting.

Although the Ministry's Special Education Guide states that IPRCs should consider information submitted by parents, the guide:

- does not suggest that school personnel should take the initiative to request information from parents that may be relevant to IPRC decisions; and
- does not include examples of the type of information that should be requested from parents to assist IPRCs in making their decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 3

To help ensure that parents are informed about and involved in the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process and that IPRCs have all the information necessary to make informed exceptionality and placement decisions, the Ministry of Education should require that school boards retain evidence, such as copies of letters to parents, that parents were informed about the IPRC process and that their input was sought on their child's strengths and needs before the original IPRC meeting.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will work with the education sector to improve the process for the collection, sharing, and storage of student information from parents.

Resources Allocated to the IPRC Process

The formal identification process generally involves the use of resources to obtain professional assessments of students that may not otherwise have been required, and the use of staff time to prepare for and attend initial IPRC meetings and annual

IPRC review meetings. One of the boards we visited indicated that it discouraged the formal identification of students via IPRCs and strictly controlled the number of referrals for professional assessments that schools were allowed to make. As a result, only 51% of its students in special education programs had been formally identified, as compared to the provincial average of 68% (Figure 1). Also, where students had been formally identified, parents typically complied with this board's requests to waive annual reviews by IPRCs, so very few resources were allocated to this activity.

We were advised by board staff that, by controlling expenditures on the IPRC process, the board was able to increase direct services to students, such as providing more special education teachers. This made time for activities such as managing student resource rooms, consulting with other teachers on strategies and accommodations, and co-ordinating the preparation of IEPs. Classroom teachers at this board said that they received a high level of support from the special education teachers. Also, unlike classroom teachers who typically have students for one year, special education teachers may deal with students with special education needs for several years, which puts them in a better position to monitor progress and co-ordinate the preparation of IEPs.

Clearly, there are pros and cons to these different resource-allocation decisions. Comparing the contribution to student outcomes made by the formal identification process to that made by additional direct services provided by special education teachers would provide useful information for all school boards. To avoid duplication, it would be appropriate for the Ministry rather than individual boards to examine this issue.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To help ensure that school boards maximize the benefits from special education expenditures, the Ministry of Education should compare the contribution to student outcomes made by the

current resource-intensive formal identification process to the contribution that additional direct services—such as more special education teachers—would provide and determine the extent to which formal identifications should be used.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue to work with school boards to optimize the use of resources to improve learning for students with special education needs without compromising the rights of parents to request the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee process when desired.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

The *Education Act* states that a special education program “includes a plan containing specific objectives and an outline of educational services that meets the needs of the exceptional pupil.” This plan is referred to as an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Regulation 181/98 requires principals to ensure that IEPs are prepared for students who have been identified as exceptional by IPRCs. The school boards we audited also prepared IEPs for students who had not been formally identified by IPRCs but whose academic performance was well below expectations.

The Ministry’s IEP guide defines an IEP as a plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a student with special needs that:

- includes learning expectations that are different from the regular curriculum expectations for a subject;
- includes the accommodations needed by the student to help achieve and/or demonstrate the achievement of his or her learning expectations; and
- serves as a planning and accountability tool for those who have responsibilities under the

plan to help the student meet the stated goals and learning expectations.

The IEP guide describes two types of different learning expectations: modified and alternative. Modified expectations are learning expectations that are based on the regular curriculum expectations. In some cases, students work toward the regular curriculum expectations for an earlier grade level—for example, a grade 4 student might work on grade 3 mathematics. For subjects not taught in earlier grades, teachers reduce the number and complexity of the learning expectations set out in the regular curriculum: the Ministry’s IEP guide has an example where, for grade 8 history, a student is expected to identify the colonies that joined Confederation but not their dates of entry, as would be part of the regular curriculum expectations.

At the secondary level, principals must decide and notify parents and students whether modifications are too significant for the courses to qualify as credits toward the Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Because of the impact on credits, we did not see many examples of modified expectations at the secondary level.

Alternative expectations are learning expectations that are not based on the regular curriculum expectations but instead are designed to help students acquire everyday knowledge and skills. Examples are Transit Training and Community Exploration, and Money Management and Personal Banking. At the secondary level, these courses do not qualify as credits for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

Accommodations are supports or services that are not provided to the general student population. For example, students may receive help with taking notes or may have access to specialized software and computers. The IEPs of many students with special education needs, particularly at the secondary level, contain only accommodations. The students are assessed against regular curriculum expectations, and consequently, at the secondary level, earn credits toward Ontario Secondary School Diplomas.

Information for Inclusion in IEPs

The Ministry publishes *The Individual Education Plan (IEP): A Resource Guide* to assist school personnel in preparing IEPs. The guide describes a number of steps in developing IEPs, including:

- collecting relevant information such as assessments by psychologists and other professionals, educational diagnostic tests, current levels of achievement, and teaching strategies that have been helpful; and
- consulting with parents, previous teachers, psychologists, and other professionals who have information relevant to the student's educational program.

Schools file such information in each student's Ontario Student Record. The Ontario Student Records we reviewed generally contained assessments by psychologists and other professionals, where appropriate. Report cards included in Ontario Student Records were the primary source of information on current levels of achievement. However, none of the files contained summaries of consultations with parents, previous teachers, psychologists, and other professionals. It was the practice of one board to file educational diagnostic tests and minutes of in-school support team meetings in these records. At one school, teachers reported in IEPs each term which accommodations—such as prompts to stay on tasks, more frequent breaks, and extra time on tests—had been effective. Such useful information was missing or incomplete at other schools.

Regulation 181/98 requires that schools consult with parents and students aged 16 or older when developing IEPs. However, neither the Ministry nor the boards had provided schools with guidance on the type of information that principals and teachers should attempt to obtain from parents, such as:

- the types of skills and abilities that might be demonstrated in the home environment that could be incorporated into teaching strategies; and

- specifics on the amount of support the parents can provide with homework and remedial assignments during the school year and summer.

RECOMMENDATION 5

To help ensure that teachers take all information relevant to students' education into account when preparing Individual Education Plans (IEPs), the Ministry of Education should:

- provide school boards with guidance on the type of information they should obtain from parents to help in preparing IEPs; and
- encourage school boards to ensure that information useful in preparing IEPs—such as summaries of information obtained from consultations with parents and psychologists and other professionals, strategies and accommodations tried by previous teachers, the results of educational diagnostic tests, and minutes of in-school support team meetings—is available to and used by the preparers.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue its strong focus on improving the IEP process. This will include creating additional resources to support schools in the gathering, recording, and sharing of information from parents to inform the IEP process. This would also continue to include training for school board and school staff around current ministry guidelines, use of the IEP template, and additional resources to support IEPs.

Setting Learning Goals and Expectations and Monitoring Student Progress

The Ministry sets the learning goals for regular education students for each subject in its curriculum policy documents. Teachers, in consultation with

parents and students aged 16 and older, set the learning goals for special education students.

Monitoring Student Progress

The Ministry's IEP guide notes that IEPs provide “an opportunity for all those involved with the student to work together to provide a program that will foster achievement and success.” One can, accordingly, judge the effectiveness of IEPs by the amount of progress students with special education needs make during each school year. In order to assess the amount of progress made by their students with special education needs, schools need to accurately measure students' positions at the beginning and again at the end of each school year. The IEP guide refers to these positions as students' current levels of achievement.

Helping students with special education needs realize their potential requires classroom teachers and special education teachers, in consultation with parents, to establish challenging but achievable learning goals. The Ministry's IEP guide defines an annual learning goal as a description of what a student can reasonably be expected to accomplish in a subject by the end of the school year. These learning goals provide teachers with the context they require to develop learning expectations for each term; students who achieve these expectations have accomplished these learning goals.

Students with special education needs are often not meeting the Ministry's regular curriculum learning goals for their age. For example, by the end of grade 3, a student with special education needs might have completed the learning expectations in language for the first two terms of grade 2. This is four terms behind the regular curriculum expectations (the student is behind by the last term of grade 2 plus the three terms of grade 3).

The IEP guide indicates that, in setting goals, teachers should consider the student's rate of acquisition of knowledge and skills (measured as the increase in the knowledge and skills the student has acquired over a given time period such as a school

term or year). Monitoring changes in students' rates of acquisition of knowledge and skills would also assist teachers in assessing the effectiveness of teaching strategies and accommodations, and replacing those strategies and accommodations which are not working as expected. Determining students' rates of acquisition of knowledge and skills requires accurate measures of the extent to which students with special education needs achieve their learning goals each year. However, the Ministry and the boards we visited had not provided schools with detailed guidance on how to:

- measure rates of acquisition of knowledge and skills; and
- use this information to assess the effectiveness of teaching strategies and accommodations, and monitor the progress of students with special education needs.

As indicated in Figure 1, the most common exceptionality is learning disabilities. The psychological assessments of most of the students in our sample who had learning disabilities indicated that they were in the average range in most respects, except for their learning disability. Although students would have a gap between their current level of achievement and regular curriculum expectations at the time they were identified, with appropriate teaching strategies and accommodations, they would normally be expected to decrease this gap over time and begin meeting regular curriculum learning expectations. For these students, we expected to see:

- a clear assessment of the gap between the students' current level of achievement and regular curriculum expectations at the start of the school year for each subject where the students are being assessed against modified expectations;
- a clear goal for the change in the gap by the end of the school year, taking into account expected improvements in students' rates of acquisition of knowledge and skills as a result of the introduction and ongoing refinement of teaching strategies and accommodations;

- assessments of rates of acquisition of knowledge and skills, the extent to which annual learning goals were met, and the impact of these results on whether to continue or revise the current teaching strategies and accommodations; and
- the expected time frame for students to eliminate the gap between their current level of achievement and regular curriculum expectations.

None of the Ontario Student Records we examined met these expectations. For example, a student in our sample was identified as learning disabled in grade 2, but otherwise in the low average range of ability. This student's educational assessment stated that he was at the grade 1 level in language and mathematics. By the time this student was in grade 8, his IEP stated that he was working on the learning expectations for grade 5 language and grade 6 mathematics. Although the gap between this student's level of achievement and regular curriculum expectations had increased since grade 2, there was no evidence in his file that the school had assessed whether his lack of progress in closing the gap was appropriate in the circumstances.

Similarly, there was no assessment in the Ontario Student Records we reviewed as to why some students were performing better than expected. In our sample, several secondary school students designated by IPRCs as having mild intellectual disabilities, for example, were performing at grade level for applied courses, with average marks of over 70%. Our sample also included a student, designated by an IPRC as having pervasive developmental disorders, who had transferred from an alternative program to the regular secondary school program and was succeeding with intensive support. Such cases could have been the result of good practices that should be identified and shared with other schools, or the result of misidentifications that should be investigated with a view to improving the identification processes.

In addition to cases where the gap between a student's current level of achievement and the

regular curriculum expectations is expected to decrease over time, there are also cases where the gap will widen over time, with no expectation that the student will return to regular curriculum expectations. In these cases, regular curriculum expectations may not be an appropriate benchmark to assess students' progress against.

RECOMMENDATION 6

To help ensure that schools properly monitor the progress of students with special education needs and identify effective practices, the Ministry of Education should provide schools with guidance on:

- how to measure the amount of students' progress in acquiring knowledge and skills, and use this information to assess the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and accommodations and make changes where appropriate; and
- monitoring the progress of students with special education needs against an appropriate benchmark—which would be, in many cases, regular curriculum expectations—and assessing whether changes in the gap between students' current levels of achievement and regular curriculum expectations are appropriate.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue to support boards in the use of the IEP to monitor effective instructional practices for students with special education needs. In addition, the Ministry is working with school boards to establish additional measures of success for students with special education needs.

Setting Learning Goals and Expectations

In response to our 2001 audit of special education, the Ministry initiated an extensive review of IEPs at

one-third of the province's school boards for three consecutive years—2001, 2002, and 2003. The Ministry conducted a follow-up program, which it called the IEP Collaborative Review: 2006-07, during late 2006 and early 2007. As part of this follow-up program, all school boards were required to submit to the Ministry samples of elementary school and secondary school IEPs, along with their corresponding report cards. The Ministry reviewed the IEPs for proper organization and content. The Ministry's report on the results of its review included the following findings:

- The current level of achievement was often either omitted or incorrectly stated.
- In the majority of IEPs, annual program goals were general statements, rather than observable or measurable information.
- Modified learning expectations were not stated as measurable tasks.

Our audit findings confirmed that there was room for improvement in these areas, both in the Ministry's IEP guide and at the schools we visited, as follows:

- Accurately stating a student's current level of achievement is a key first step in setting annual learning goals and expectations. We found that 47% of the IEPs in our sample that had modified learning expectations contained errors regarding the current level of achievement. We also noted that, in the examples provided in the IEP guide, the student's current level of achievement is stated in whole years rather than in terms. For example, the current level of achievement in language of a student starting grade 4 in September is shown as grade 2, without reference to a term. Clearly, a student who has achieved the learning expectations for the third and final term of a grade is significantly ahead of one who has achieved the expectations for only one term. Since a student's achievements by term are readily available, the rationale for using a less precise measure of student achievement is unclear.

- We found that the examples in the IEP guide for annual learning goals were measurable for language and mathematics but vague for other subjects. For example, the goal for science is that the student "will demonstrate improved understanding of basic concepts." This is not a meaningful goal, since any amount of achievement would meet it. Some of the schools we audited had measurable learning goals such as, for language, the student "will improve reading comprehension skills to a mid-grade 6 level and writing skills to a late grade 5 level." However, we also saw many examples of vague, unmeasurable goals, such as the student "will be able to complete the grade 5 math program with reduced expectations" and the student will "further develop phonetic and decoding skills."
- We found that the learning expectations in the IEPs we reviewed tended to be more specific for mathematics and language than for other subjects. For example, an expectation for mathematics was that the student "learn to add and subtract one-digit whole numbers." For science and technology, in contrast, an IEP had only a vague, unmeasurable expectation that the student would "investigate features of the earth's water resources (oceans, rivers, lakes, glaciers, snowfall, clouds, gas in atmosphere)."

The IEP guide also states that when a student is expected to achieve "most of the subject expectations" at the regular grade level without modifications, those few expectations that were modified "should contain an indication of how they differ from the expectations as they appear in the Ministry's curriculum policy documents." Thus, in the history example from the IEP guide presented earlier, the student is expected to identify the colonies that joined Confederation, but not, as required for the regular curriculum, their dates of entry. However, for subjects other than language and mathematics, we did not see many instances in the IEPs we reviewed that explained differences

between the learning expectations in the IEP and those of the regular curriculum.

The IEP guide notes the need for all those responsible for the education of a student with special needs—parents, teachers, guidance counsellor, principal, special education staff and support personnel, and staff from community agencies as appropriate—to develop “a common understanding” of the student’s educational goals. The use of more precise measures and language in IEPs would facilitate a common understanding.

RECOMMENDATION 7

To help ensure that teachers, parents, and students with special education needs have a common understanding of the learning goals and expectations for the coming school year, and to assist in monitoring the students’ progress:

- the Ministry of Education should update *The Individual Education Plan (IEP): A Resource Guide* so that it:
 - provides examples of specific learning goals for all subjects, as it has done for language and mathematics; and
 - clarifies its expectations regarding explanations of differences between the learning expectations in an IEP and those of the regular curriculum; and
- school boards should ensure that schools set measurable learning goals and measurable learning expectations in IEPs.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue to provide examples of effective practice in this area. The Ministry will also continue to provide training around the resource guide for IEPs and the sharing of effective practices regarding measurable learning goals. The Ministry will share effective practices that have led to a 17-point increase in grade 3 EQAO writing scores, and an 11-point increase in grade 6 writing scores this past year.

SUMMARY OF SCHOOL BOARDS’ RESPONSES

The three school boards agree that the learning expectations in IEPs should be measurable, and agree that learning goals should be measurable, or observable but written in a way that clearly defines the task expected to be performed. In addition to their ongoing in-service training of teachers and administrators in this regard, the boards intend to check that IEP learning goals and expectations are properly prepared—two boards intend to perform internal reviews of a sample of IEPs similar to the Ministry’s collaborative review program, while the other board intends to incorporate this work into its school effectiveness reviews.

One board indicated that it would be helpful if the Ministry provided additional guidance on modifying the learning expectations for secondary school courses, while still allowing the students concerned to obtain credits toward an Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

The board also suggested that, to help meet the training requirements necessitated by the implementation of this and other recommendations, the Ministry should produce 15-to-20-minute video clips/webcasts to provide electronic in-service training that staff could access at any time—for example, a video clip/webcast on how to write a measurable expectation, giving examples for different grades.

Timely Preparation of IEPs

In addition to learning goals and expectations, IEPs set out the accommodations teachers are to provide to students with special education needs and the teaching strategies they should use. It is therefore essential that they be completed promptly. For this reason, Regulation 181/98 requires that IEPs be completed within 30 school days of:

- a student's initial placement in a special education program; and
 - the start of school for students returning to a special education program in September.
- The due date for the 2007/08 school year was October 16.

The proportion of IEPs in our sample completed by the due date improved from 17% in our 2001 audit to almost 50% in this audit. At two schools we visited, the IEPs for all of the files we reviewed had been completed by the due date and signed by the principals, parents, and the students aged 16 and older. At the other schools, the IEPs that missed the due date were late by an average of almost four weeks at elementary schools and seven weeks at secondary schools.

At the secondary school where the IEPs had been completed on time, we were advised that it was the practice to have special education teachers begin meeting with parents and students 16 and older in early September to discuss objectives and plans for the coming year. The purpose of these meetings was to help ensure that parents, teachers, and students understood and agreed to the learning goals and expectations and accommodations.

RECOMMENDATION 8

To help ensure that students with special education needs receive timely support as outlined in their Individual Education Plans (IEPs), the Ministry of Education should compare procedures and practices at a sample of school boards where the IEP deadlines are routinely met with those where they are usually not met, and include examples of timelines and effective practices in the IEP guide.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry supports, encourages, and facilitates the sharing of effective practices in the use of IEPs. The Ministry will continue to audit the timeliness and appropriateness of IEPs.

The Ministry will continue to use tools such as school board program and financial reviews to complete this process.

REPORTING ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND PROGRESS

As described earlier in this report, for those subjects to which their IEPs apply, students with special education needs may work toward:

- regular curriculum expectations for their grade with accommodations;
- modified expectations; or
- alternative expectations.

Suitability of Standard Provincial Report Card for Students with Special Education Needs

The Ministry requires schools to use the standard provincial report card for reporting on the performance of students with special education needs in the first two categories. For students who are attending courses where they are working toward alternative expectations, the Ministry's IEP guide notes that "it is not required, nor is it advisable, for grades or marks to be assigned for the achievement of alternative expectations." The rationale is that a student has either acquired the skill being taught or has not—for example, has learned how to use public transportation independently to travel to selected destinations. However, the Ministry has not developed a report card for alternative expectations, although two of the three boards that we audited had done so.

The use of the provincial report card for students with special education needs who receive only accommodations is appropriate, since they are working toward regular curriculum expectations. However, it is less suitable for reporting on the performance of students working toward modified expectations, because it is not designed to report on

which learning expectations they met. As a result, it cannot adequately report on students' progress toward meeting their learning goals. Some schools at one of the boards we visited had also been reporting on students' performance in their IEPs, with marks opposite each learning expectation, but had discontinued this practice in the 2006/07 school year. Teachers advised us that parents found this method of reporting easy to follow. Having such specific information would also assist the teacher responsible for preparing the next IEP.

Meaningful Report Cards

We found examples, particularly at the elementary school level, where report cards discussed the student's positive attributes but did not provide a candid discussion of the student's performance relative to expectations. As a result, some parents may not fully understand their child's rate of progress and areas for improvement. Some parents said that they genuinely did not know how well their children were doing overall. Parents also felt that while their children may have received credit for creativity, oral skills, and effort, the fact that their reading and writing was poor was not reflected in the report card. For example:

- A report card contained comments on how well and independently the student worked, and the subsequent report card observed that the student had proven that a good work ethic resulted in success. After seeing this report card the parents cancelled all special education services. However, according to the IEP, the student was still well below curriculum expectations in language and mathematics.
- Another report card stated that in visual arts the student usually mixed primary colours to create secondary colours. However, since this action was not directly related to a learning objective for visual arts, this comment conveyed little meaningful performance information.

Assessment Guidelines for Modified Expectations

Where students are working toward the curriculum expectations for an earlier grade level, teachers assess them against the expectations for that grade. However, neither the boards nor the Ministry has provided teachers with guidance on how to assess students when they are working toward lowered expectations for the current grade's curriculum. As mentioned earlier, we found that learning expectations in these cases tended to be vague rather than measurable. The result, as teachers indicated to us, is that sometimes all that is being marked is effort. The May 2006 report *Special Education Transformation* also recognized the need to develop appropriate measures to assess and track the progress of students who have modified curriculum expectations.

RECOMMENDATION 9

To help ensure that parents and students understand how students are performing when they are being assessed against modified and alternative expectations, as opposed to regular curriculum expectations:

- the Ministry of Education should:
 - reconsider the suitability of the standard provincial report card for reporting on the performance of students who are working toward modified expectations;
 - provide examples of the type of performance reports it expects school boards to use for students working toward alternative expectations; and
 - provide guidance to assist teachers in assessing the performance of students who are working toward reduced expectations for the current grade's curriculum; and
- school boards should ensure that report cards provide parents and students with meaningful assessments of student performance relative to learning goals and expectations.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will review reporting for students with special education needs who are working toward modified and/or alternative expectations. The Ministry also supports communicating the achievement of students who are not accessing the provincial curriculum through an alternative format, for example, the Individual Education Plan (IEP). This communication of achievement will include information on how students' modified expectations are to be recognized through the Provincial Skills Certificate, the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, and the provincial report card. The Ministry will continue to enhance its guidelines for IEPs in the area of modified expectations to ensure that benchmarks are shared within the system.

SUMMARY OF SCHOOL BOARDS' RESPONSES

The three school boards agree that parents and students should be provided with meaningful assessments of students' performance, and are working on this issue through in-service training designed to further strengthen the capacity of teachers to assess, evaluate, and report consistently on levels of student performance. One board states that it intends to perform an internal review of a sample of IEPs similar to the Ministry's IEP collaborative review program, which will include checking that report cards for students with special education needs are aligned with IEPs.

TRANSITION PLANNING

For students with special education needs who are 14 years of age or older, Regulation 181/98 requires IEPs to include a plan for transition to appropriate post-secondary-school activities, such as work, further education, and community living. (This

requirement does not apply to students whose only exceptionality is giftedness.) The Ministry published *Transition Planning: A Resource Guide* in 2002 to assist school personnel in preparing transition plans.

We found that the plans were completed for all students aged 14 and older at the schools we audited. However, the samples in the transition planning guide, which are designed as to-do lists, have no place to report which of the listed actions were completed and, in the case of items such as cooperative work placements, the degree of success.

In addition to post-secondary transition plans, the Ministry's IEP guide recommends preparing plans to assist students with special education needs in transitions such as changing schools or moving from elementary to secondary school. The May 2006 report *Special Education Transformation* recommended that the Ministry "investigate, share, and implement effective transition practices for students with special education needs. Multiple transition points such as entry to school, between schools, between elementary and secondary panels, and school to postsecondary destinations should be characterized by collaboration between professionals, family, and student, and by co-ordination of service providers."

However, we found that there was no documentation in our sample of Ontario Student Records of planning for transitions such as changing schools or moving from elementary to secondary school, although we were told that the special education teachers at each school discuss these transitions. Better documentation in Ontario Student Records of the teaching strategies and accommodations that worked or did not work would assist in planning for school-to-school and elementary-to-secondary-school transitions.

The transition from elementary to secondary school can be especially difficult for students with special education needs who are working toward modified expectations at the elementary level but change to regular curriculum expectations with accommodations at the secondary level, because of

the need to obtain credits. For example, a grade 8 student working on grade 6 mathematics would clearly not be prepared for secondary school mathematics, even at the applied level. In some cases this problem was handled by placing the students in what were, in effect, remedial classes to bridge the gap. However, we also saw cases where the transition could have been managed better. For example, a student who had a learning disability was, at the beginning of grade 8, working toward modified expectations and performing, according to his IEP, at the grade 6 level in mathematics and the grade 4 level in language. At the end of grade 8, he was transferred to grade 9, where he enrolled in grade 9 applied-level courses and worked toward curriculum expectations, with accommodations only, on all subjects. He failed all his courses and started showing attendance problems in the second semester of grade 9; by grade 10, he was missing the majority of his classes. Detailed guidance on managing transitions of students who are performing significantly below regular curriculum expectations would help schools provide appropriate supports to students in such situations.

RECOMMENDATION 10

To help ensure that transitions of students with special education needs from school to school, from elementary to secondary school, and from secondary school to work, community living, or further education, are effectively managed, the Ministry of Education should:

- require that schools prepare plans for all transitions—not just transitions from secondary school—and report on the completion and, where applicable, the degree of success of each action in the transition plans; and
- provide more guidance on planning and managing the transitions of students who are working toward modified expectations.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

Through the Student Success initiatives, the Ministry has focused on the transitions from grade 8 to grade 9 for all students, including students with special education needs. The Ministry will continue to review the IEP process as it relates to transition planning.

MONITORING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS, QUALITY, AND COMPLIANCE

Principals are required to ensure that their schools comply with numerous legislative, regulatory, and policy requirements regarding the delivery of special education services and programs. Superintendents are responsible for ensuring that the principals who report to them have taken appropriate steps to meet these requirements. However, the Ministry does not require boards to establish a formal inspection process to verify compliance by schools with legislative, regulatory, and policy requirements as, for example, financial institutions would have in place with respect to their branches. The work by superintendents is not a substitute for a formal inspection process that periodically examines the special education services and supports provided to a sample of students and reports on the results of the inspections. None of the boards that we audited had established formal inspection processes.

In addition to compliance, the scope of inspections would also normally include identifying:

- locally initiated best practices that should be considered for implementation across the board; and
- policies and practices that may no longer be appropriate in the light of changes in technology, educational practices, or new research. This information would enable school boards to update their own policies and to provide advice to the Ministry regarding outdated legislative, regulatory, and policy requirements.

As mentioned earlier, in response to our last audit, the Ministry reviewed large samples of IEPs for proper organization and content, in 2001 through 2003, and again in 2006/07. The number and seriousness of the findings in the Ministry's report on its 2006/07 review, as well as our findings in this audit, support the need for formal inspection processes.

Starting in the 2007/08 school year, the Ministry's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat began providing school boards with financial support—\$16 million in 2007/08 and \$13 million in 2008/09—and advice regarding a school effectiveness review process. The process is intended to “provide ways in which teachers and school and system administrators accept responsibility to hold themselves accountable for ensuring that research-based, effective strategies are consistently implemented across the province.” The Superintendent of Special Education at one of the boards we audited stated that it was her intention to expand the school effectiveness review process to more thoroughly cover special education program quality and compliance.

RECOMMENDATION 11

To help ensure that schools comply with legislation, regulations, and policies, and to improve the quality of special education programs, the Ministry of Education should assist school boards in establishing periodic quality assurance and compliance inspection procedures.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue to conduct school board program and financial reviews to assist school boards with their compliance with special education legislation, and also to enhance the sharing of effective practices.

SUMMARY OF SCHOOL BOARDS' RESPONSES

One school board noted that it is pilot-testing a record-management system that is intended to enable staff to electronically complete the forms involved in the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee and Individual Education Plan (IEP) processes and store this information. When implemented, the system will support management oversight of the board's special education program by providing principals, superintendents, and program staff with reports on, for example, the status of IEP development so that they can monitor compliance with the 30-day requirement for the completion of IEPs.

COMPLETENESS OF STUDENT RECORDS AND INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH

The Ministry's Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat stresses the importance of using “research, evidence-based inquiry and data-based decision-making” to improve student achievement. Ministry reports, including *Education for All* (2005) and *Special Education Transformation* (2006), also support this position. Moving the education sector's decision-making and educational practices from the traditional intuitive/experience-based approach to an evidence/research-based approach requires the collection of better and more detailed data about students, their educational programs and services, and their performance.

To facilitate evidence-based instruction, in 2005 the Ministry initiated the Managing Information for Student Achievement (MISA) program to assist boards with the cost of new technology, training, and building of analytical capacity. MISA has provided school boards with \$20 million per year over the last three years to fund information system projects and will provide \$10 million in 2008/09.

Information Included in Ontario Student Records

The Ministry's *Ontario Student Record (OSR) Guideline*, published in 2000, states that student records should contain basic personal information, report cards, and "additional information identified as being conducive to the improvement of the instruction of the student." Our audit revealed that school boards were not interpreting this guideline in a sufficiently comprehensive manner.

As we have noted earlier, there were numerous omissions from Ontario Student Records of information needed to support an evidence-based approach to the development of IEPs. Information missing at all or some of the schools we audited included: notes on consultations with parents regarding skills and abilities their children demonstrated in the home environment; notes on teaching strategies and accommodations that did or did not work; summaries of the type, timing, and amount of services and supports provided over time; the amount of progress students made during each reporting period; and minutes of in-school support team meetings.

Student Information Systems

To develop evidence-based program delivery models, researchers must be able to conduct large-scale studies that cover the progress of students over a number of years. In addition to contributing to administrative efficiencies, the Ministry's implementation of the Ontario Student Information System (OnSIS) in 2005/06 and ongoing improvements are intended to support such research.

School boards' information systems can also be used to support research if they contain sufficient reliable information about the educational programs and performance of students with special education needs, as well as personal data such as age and exceptionality. As student histories are built up, researchers could track a student's progress over time and compare results among

similar groups of students who received different services and supports. This would help identify the special education practices that produce the best results. For example, earlier in this report we noted that one of the boards we audited conducted fewer professional assessments and IPRCs than the other two boards and used the savings to help cover the cost of more special education teachers. The ability to study the performance of students with special education needs over the long term is required to answer questions such as whether this approach results in better student outcomes.

The availability of basic information about students with special education needs from information systems had improved since our audit in 2001, and a number of information system initiatives were underway at the time of our audit. However, the school boards we audited were not yet recording on their systems sufficient information regarding students with special education needs and the services and supports they received to support detailed analyses. As a result, the boards could not yet use information systems in significant ways to help manage and oversee special education programs. For example, we mentioned earlier the need to monitor school effectiveness in early identification of students with special education needs and to review the procedures at schools where exceptions occurred. Boards that recorded the date of a student's first IEP on their information systems could monitor whether students are falling through the cracks. An October 2006 report by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education noted that superintendents responsible for special education identified further learning about the effective use of data as a critical need.

RECOMMENDATION 12

To help improve the effectiveness of special education programs, the Ministry of Education should:

- identify the information that is required to support evidence-based program delivery

models (for example, information about the circumstances and educational programs—type, timing, and amount of services and supports—of students with special education needs, as well as the results the students achieve); and

- assist school boards in establishing processes to collect, maintain, and use this information to guide programming decisions.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue to develop and share instructional practices built on a foundation that is, wherever possible, evidence-based, research-informed, and connected to the Ministry's priority education goals for students with special education needs. This will build upon the Council of Ontario Directors of Education projects funded over the last three years, including the identification of innovative and effective practices. This will also build upon the recent successes of students with special education needs as identified through data provided by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Examples of these recent successes include a 17% increase in grade 3 English-language students at or above the provincial standard in writing, up from 20% in 2006/07 to 37% in 2007/08, and an 11% increase in grade 6 English-language students at or above the provincial standard in writing, up from 17% in 2006/07 to 28% in 2007/08. These successes have been achieved with a significant rise in the number of students with special education needs taking EQAO tests.

SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

Timely Acquisition

Some students with special education needs require specialized equipment, such as computers and soft-

ware, to enable them to attend school and progress with their studies. For example, a student who has a reading comprehension learning disability has difficulty reading curriculum materials, assignments, and tests. Specialized software and equipment that converts text to speech and vice versa enables the student to learn and demonstrate what he or she has learned. A student's need for specialized equipment must be recommended by a professional such as a psychologist.

School boards pay the first \$800 for all equipment purchased for a student each year plus 20% of any related set-up and staff training costs. Boards file claims with the Ministry to obtain Special Equipment Amount (SEA) grants for the balance of the costs.

The Ministry publishes guidelines for SEA claims that also include school boards' responsibilities regarding matters such as maintaining adequate inventory records for equipment; ensuring that equipment is made available to other students when it is no longer needed by the student for whom it was purchased; and ensuring that equipment is properly maintained. However, the guidelines do not contain a service expectation with respect to the time between the date a professional recommends that a student be provided with specialized equipment and the date it is ready for use by the student. None of the boards we audited had established an expectation in this regard. At schools we audited we found that the time between the recommendation and ready-for-use dates typically ranged from three months or less to more than 12 months.

Savings by Purchasing Group Licences

Where students require computer software to assist them with their academic progress, school boards can purchase either a software licence for each student or a group licence for the board. The staff member responsible for purchasing assistive software at one board told us that significant amounts could be saved by purchasing group licences. However, because SEA claims can be made for

the acquisition of specialized technology only for individual students, the board was not able to take advantage of these opportunities to reduce costs.

Effectiveness of Specialized Technology

The purpose of providing students with specialized equipment is to help improve their academic progress. However, the Ministry does not require school boards to assess, and the boards we audited were not assessing, whether the equipment purchased was helping the student. Items purchased may not achieve their purpose for a number of reasons, such as poor design or inadequate training in their use. Information on the extent to which equipment is achieving its purpose would help boards determine whether to switch to other products, improve training, or discontinue purchasing certain types of equipment.

RECOMMENDATION 13

To help ensure that specialized equipment purchased for students is provided to them within a reasonable time, meets their needs, and is acquired economically, the Ministry of Education should:

- include a service expectation in its guidelines for Special Equipment Amount claims, and require school boards to ensure that their processes achieve this expectation, with respect to the time between the date a professional recommends that a student be provided with specialized equipment and the date it is ready for use by the student;
- assess the level of savings that might be available from the purchase of group licences for computer software; and
- require that boards assess the effectiveness of the equipment that they purchase.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry will continue to work with school boards to optimize the use and timely acquisition of assistive equipment.

OTHER MATTER

Funding for special education includes the Special Incidence Portion (SIP) grant, which is a claims-based grant. School boards may submit claims to the Ministry for up to \$27,000 per student for students who require more than two full-time staff to address their health and/or safety needs. The Ministry paid over \$13 million and \$12 million in SIP grants to school boards in the 2005/06 and 2006/07 school years respectively.

The Ministry includes each board's estimated SIP claims in its annual grants to school boards. The intention is that actual claims will be reconciled to the estimated claims and that the following year's grant will be adjusted for any differences. However, the Ministry had not yet completed the reconciliation for one of the boards we audited. As a result, the Ministry did not detect errors in its claims processing. This led to an underpayment of \$575,000 for the 2005/06 school year and an overpayment of \$2.1 million for 2006/07.

RECOMMENDATION 14

To ensure that Special Incidence Portion grants are correctly calculated, the Ministry should reconcile the funding provided to each board's actual claims annually.

MINISTRY RESPONSE

The Ministry has an annual reconciliation process. The Ministry will review its reconciliation process, including more timely adjustments after reconciliation.