

June 26, 2023

Honourable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education
Mowat Block, 22nd Floor
900 Bay Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1L2

Dear Minister Stephen Lecce,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Simcoe County District School Board's (SCDSB) Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). We would like to start off by thanking you for the funding announcements for the 2023-24 school year. As one of Ontario's top growth boards, being provided with this information in a timely manner, is essential in maximizing the efficient and effective use of funding, as well as being able to bring forward a balanced budget in accordance with Ministry requirements. Recognizing that the hard work of preparing for next year's funding allocation has already begun, we are contacting you now with concerns and suggestions for consideration in your decision-making process for the province's future special education funding models.

A key aspect of the special education funding is ensuring allocated funding aligns with the current needs of the board in 2023. To maximize the allocated special education funding, it should be based on the most recent and relevant educational and community needs data, rather than drawing on previous community-data (legacy census data) that may not adequately reflect ongoing changes in population demographics, diversity, or the current and future needs. Simcoe County has changed significantly in recent decades, and these changes need to be taken into account when making financial decisions to support our students effectively. While we appreciate that special education funding has generally increased in recent years in the SCDSB, increases have largely been proportional to changes in enrolment and/or reflected increases in wages, rather than actual increased supports and services for students.

In the SCDSB, approximately 1 in every 5 students (approx. 11,500) has a special education related strength and need. Since the pandemic (COVID-19), the complexity of the needs of students has increased dramatically. Our most vulnerable students, especially those with special education and/or mental health needs, have been disproportionately impacted by the prolonged pandemic, caused by extended periods of school closures, restricted access to community-based services and supports (speech and language and occupational therapy), limited access to other children needed to develop pro-social skills, self-regulation, and strong oral language skills, which are all essential elements to maximizing success at school and in life after school. To minimize the impact of the pandemic on students with disabilities, significant and sustained investment will be required to alleviate long-term negative effects.

The success of students with special education and/or mental health needs at school is also greatly impacted by other aspects of educational funding, including access to appropriate physical space at school (opportunities for therapy at school to reduce unnecessary transition or time away from school), transportation funding (modified start and end times, travel distances to access specialized programming), etc. The SCDSB's Board of Trustees has recently written to the Ministry of Education to express concerns related to the need for capital funding, as well as

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changes in transportation funding. We would like to add our support to those previously identified concerns, and to reiterate the impact that these other types of education funding have on students with special education needs, and the corresponding appropriate supports that the board is then able to offer.

As you know, Ontario was the first province in Canada (2005) to pass legislation (*The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005* [AODA]), with the goal and timeline of removing barriers to accessibility, including in schools by 2025. As we approach 2025 (date identified in AODA), many schools in the SCDSB continue to require significant investments in their facility infrastructure to reduce physical barriers, such as elevators, ramps, accessible washrooms, as well as accessible forms of transportation. We urge the Ministry to communicate with boards as to how these needed changes will be financially supported as the deadline quickly approaches.

Student success at school doesn't begin or end at the school's front door. To appropriately support students with special education needs in schools, a whole community wrap-around approach is required. Funding of services and supports provided through other ministries, such as timely access to community-based mental health supports, medical doctors, speech, physical and occupational therapy, nursing to support students with diabetes, and the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) also impact students' success while at school. Legislated wage restrictions in various public education or health-care sectors have negatively impacted the ability to hire and retain sufficient and high-quality clinical staff, educational assistants, child and youth workers, special education resource teachers, etc., to meet the increasingly complex needs of students emerging from the pandemic.

As the complexity of the needs of our communities continue to grow and change over time, comprehensive funding for Education and Community Partnership Programs (ECCP) (Section 23) needs to recognize the true costs for boards to partner with community agencies to offer successful care and treatment programs for students (transportation, staffing, facility costs, etc.).

The SCDSB's SEAC is supportive of the recommendations outlined in the Ontario Human Rights Commission's Right to Read Inquiry, as well as the recent funding announcements by the Ministry of Education to support improvements in reading instruction. Sustained funding, as well as a long-term commitment will be required to match the increasing complex needs of our students. Professional learning will improve not only the quality of instruction, it will help reduce attitudinal barriers faced by students with disabilities related to stereotypes, lack of knowledge, and sensitivity to their needs.

We also wish to express our support in the concerns recently communicated by many SEAC's regarding the funding of the Special Incidence Portion (SIP). While we appreciate the Ministry's recent updates to this funding model, we are concerned that recent changes may not adequately reflect SCDSB's growth and/or increasing complexity of students. We look forward to an update on these changes, including plans to address the needs of the growth boards within the province.

On behalf of the SCDSB's SEAC we would like to thank you for your time and dedication to all Ontario students, especially the most vulnerable with special education strengths and needs, who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. We wish to urge the Minister to take our concerns and suggestions into consideration when planning for future funding allocations and decisions. We appreciate the Minister's respect for our committee's understanding of our local needs and the importance of our advocacy on behalf of the needs of our students and families. We would be happy for the opportunity to discuss any of the above issues further, and we look forward to your response. We thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Brandy Rafeek
Chairperson, SEAC



Kevin Berry
Vice-chairperson, SEAC

c: Jodi Lloyd, Chairperson, SCDSB
John Dance, Director of Education, SCDSB
Dawn Stephens, Associate Director of Education, SCDSB
Chris Samis, Superintendent of Student Achievement and Special Education, SCDSB
Hon. Doug Downey, MPP, Barrie–Springwater–Oro-Medonte
Hon. Jill Dunlop, MPP, Simcoe North
Hon. Caroline Mulroney, MPP, York-Simcoe
Andrea Khanjin, MPP, Barrie–Innisfil
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Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA)
Chairs of all Ontario Special Education Advisory Committees