

CERC IN HEALTH EQUITY AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING *PERSPECTIVES:*

CHAOS IN THE CLASSROOM: HOW BUDGET CUTS ARE FAILING OUR MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS

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Special Education vs. IEP

According to the Ontario government, special education encompasses the broader programs and services tailored to meet the unique needs of students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, autism and other exceptionalities. Within that framework, an IEP (individual education plan) serves as a written plan that outlines the specific accommodations, programs and services a school board will provide



for an individual student—essentially the blueprint for how they are meant to be supported to thrive academically. However, no matter how carefully crafted that blueprint is, it's only as good as the resources available to bring it to life. In other words, without adequate staffing, funding and classroom support, an IEP risks becoming a hollow document, leaving students and families with a promise that the system cannot keep.

Budget Cuts

That hollowing is already underway in Ontario where budget reductions are chipping away at school boards with stark differences between districts. In May 2026, the Ontario Government posted its breakdown of education funding changes across its 72 school boards. Breaking the 72 school boards by language—

English and French—and by affiliation—Catholic and non-Catholic—significant discrepancies were revealed in how funding changes are distributed.

French-language school boards are seeing a \$6 million increase, while English-language school boards are seeing a \$10 million decrease in special education funding - a \$16 million difference by language.



Catholic-affiliated school boards are seeing an \$18 million increase while non-Catholic-affiliated school boards are seeing a \$23 million decrease in special education funding—a \$41 million difference by affiliation.

TDSB is seen to be hit with one of the major cuts in special education funding, decreasing their special education budget by \$6.4 million, a 1.6% decrease from last year.

Toronto is also one of the few districts where both its Catholic and non-Catholic school boards are hit with decreases in special education funding, resulting in a total loss of \$7.7 million.

TDSB’s interim executive officer of finance, Stephanie Harris, attempts to explain that the reduction in special education funding is directly tied to anticipated decreases in student enrollment driven by decreased federal immigration targets and younger families moving out of the GTA due to affordability concerns. However, TorontoToday has contradicted this, reporting increased parent interest in private school admissions for September 2026. If families are staying in Toronto but abandoning public schools for private alternatives, the problem is not

simply demographics but a failure or lack of trust in the public system to meet the needs of its students.

Funding Isn't Keeping Up

It has been well-documented that special education funding has not adequately met student needs. Auditor General Shelley Spence states that “even though the funding has kept up with inflation, it has not kept in place with the growth in special education needs.” Ontario’s 2016 General Report also revealed that out of Ontario’s 72 school boards, 46 of them collectively spent almost \$400 million (14%) more than they were funded in special education in 2023/24, while the remaining 26 boards underspent by a combined \$50 million, representing 7% less than their funding.

Lost on How This Is Calculated?

This leaves Ontarians with a pressing question: If declined enrollment justifies funding cuts, how does the province explain the \$400 million gap between what districts actually spent on special education and what they received?

Opposition leaders like Marit Stiles have been asking the same question, pressing the province on how anticipated enrollment is calculated or even explained when there is little to no tracking of why students are leaving the system. “More needs to be done, more consistency, better data

collection and ensuring that what we’re doing, the money that we’re spending has the results that are required to have the best outcomes for students,” states Education Minister Paul Calandra.



No Teacher Changes

It's not just the funding that's failing students right now. Despite expecting less government funding due to decreased enrollment, school boards have stated that they will not cut special education staff, maintaining the same number of teachers and educational assistants to remain next year. However, TDSB Trustee Michelle Aarts questions how this is even possible, pointing out that staff salaries and benefits represent the largest special education expense—and if funding is decreasing, how can staffing levels realistically stay the same?

Training Inadequacies

But the issue here isn't simply the number of teachers, but whether those teachers and staff are equipped to do their jobs effectively. A growing body of research suggests that funding levels matter less than the recruitment and retention of high-quality educators and delivery of evidence-based practices to help students achieve academic success.



Yet a recent audit of two school boards in Ontario found that only 21% of classroom teachers said they were able to meet most of the needs of special education students in their class. Even more alarming, 87% of teachers said they could sometimes, rarely or never support the delivery of students' IEPs because they lacked the necessary resources. This is not a problem that more bodies in the classroom can fix, but is a crisis of training, support and systemic neglect.

Pattern of Systemic Neglect

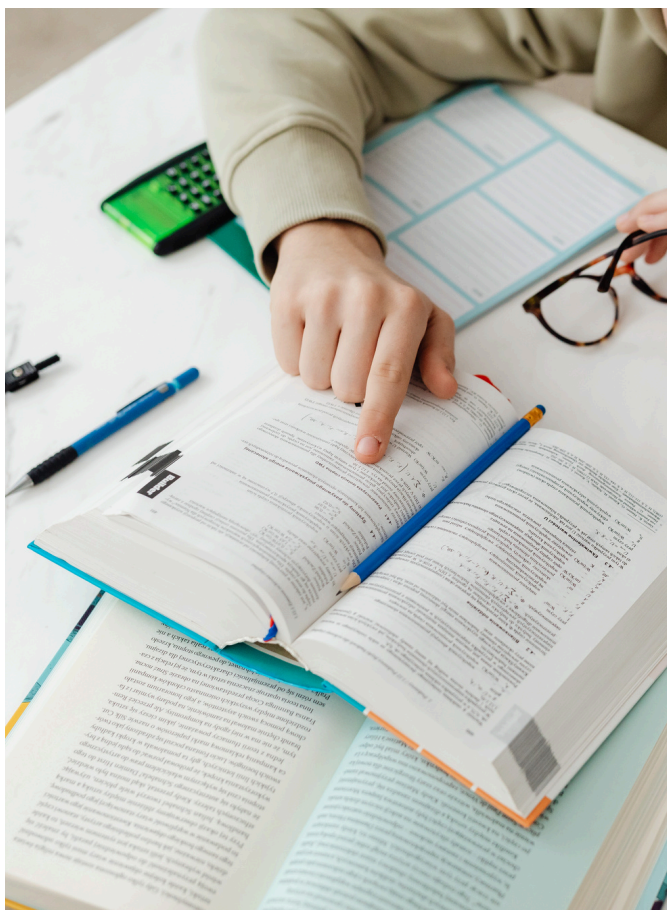
This pattern of systemic neglect extends far beyond the classroom walls. Last July, Rohit Gupta, the province's appointed supervisor for special education, increased class sizes in diagnostic kindergartens from 8 to 10 students for disabled three- to

five-year-olds. As a result, Kindergarten teachers told TorontoToday it created “absolute chaos,” with more students harming themselves, their peers, and their teachers. Fueling the turmoil, the board now plans to eliminate 15 of these classrooms next fall, again citing declining enrollment.

David Lepofsky, chair of the TDSB’s special education advisory committee, summed up the broader concern: “When the base amount wasn’t enough, and they’re reducing it more...we’re in trouble.” Ontario Liberal Leader John Fraser agreed, adding that “classes aren’t safe places to learn or to work, because class sizes are big, and special education has been starved,” he said. “If it’s been starved, why are they giving it less?”

Going Back to What IEP vs. Special Education Is

At its core, defunding special education isn’t a direct attack on IEPs, but on special education as a whole, which affects the programs, services, and staffing that ultimately affect a child’s ability to access their legally mandated education.



Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario President David Mastin chimes in, stating “the system isn’t just strained; it’s fundamentally ableist.” This sentiment has been echoed throughout different levels of government, with Marit Stiles emphasizing “they are failing our children, and they are putting them in harm’s way... At the end of the day, what we’re seeing overall is a failure to properly fund education, not just based on numbers like bums in seats, but based on need. If you are not funding based on need, you are never going to be funding properly.”

Green Leader Mike Schreiner also reinforces this sentiment, stating, “There are so many children with special needs who can’t even go to school because there are no supports there for them. And this government doesn’t take responsibility for it.”

So where does that leave us? The Provincial Government must be held accountable, as we demand structural changes to prioritize students in funding changes, including:

1. Standardized training for all staff to adequately implement IEPs.
2. Decrease class sizes for children with special needs.
3. Increase in TDSB funding, with special education funding allocated to student resources and needs rather than absorbed by administrative salaries.



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