

March 27, 2019

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

Honourable Lisa MacLeod
Minister of Children, Community and Social Services
Hepburn Block, 6th Floor
80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1E9

Dear Ministers Thompson and MacLeod,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Simcoe County District School Board's (SCDSB) Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). We are extremely concerned with some of the recent changes made to the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) and the effects that these changes will have on students, staff and families.

Members of SEAC are concerned that with the funding changes, many students will be transitioning from community-based, specialized, intensive therapy, to the public school system. These students may be entering our schools either for the first time, or to spend an increased amount of time in school. While we appreciate the recent announcement regarding expected changes and supports, we still feel it will be extremely challenging for our school board to be in a position to ensure that we can adequately provide the transitional and navigational supports that these students will require.

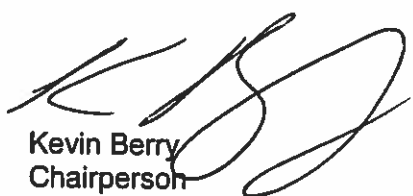
We have begun to hear from families that will be transitioning to school starting April 1, 2019. However, the board remains unaware of how many students it may need to prepare for, as well as what the needs of these students may be. This amount of preparation time is seriously concerning for a number of reasons. All school boards, including the SCDSB, experience significant fiscal challenges related to special education, and while recent announcements extending the March 31, 2019 enrolment count date provides some degree of short-term funding relief to support transition, changes to the OAP will only serve to exacerbate the challenge. Many of these students may be transitioning from levels of therapy that our schools will not be able to match, due to financial and staffing limitations. Our staff are dedicated to providing the best education and care to all students within our board. However, our staff are not able to provide the same level of therapies that children have been receiving in specialized therapy programs. We fear that without appropriate supports and transitions, some children could lose important clinical gains.

We were very pleased to hear Minister MacLeod's announcement on March 21, 2019, that some children will be eligible to extend their current levels of therapy for six months. However, we are still unaware of what this means for our schools. We do not have adequate information of how many students may be entering our board, or what their needs may be. Better access to this information, coupled with an extension of current therapies will allow better preparation time for school boards, to ensure that we are able to properly accommodate transitioning students. A short amount of transition time, we worry, will be especially detrimental for all involved. Connections for Students, the current program in place to support students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) transitioning from Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) to school, recommends planning begin six months prior to planned date of admission to school. Changes for students with ASD can be especially unsettling, and transition into school is of particular importance for these students. While we understand that some changes may need to be made, we feel that proper transitioning is imperative. This crucial time is needed to ensure that a plan is developed to support the safety and success of all involved. We encourage the Ministers to continue to listen to feedback from all stakeholders and to work together with school boards to ensure children with ASD are able to continue to receive the supports and therapies that allow them to grow and develop essential skills.

Our front-line educators and administrators are dedicated to providing our students with the best care and education possible. However, we are concerned that with the influx of students entering the regular classroom, that are in need of unavailable supports, there will be a great deal of undo stress on all students within the classroom. This will not be conducive to an environment that supports student success and well-being. We expect all staff and students within our schools to be negatively impacted by these changes.

We understand and respect that you are striving to improve the supports available for families living with ASD. We ask that you consider our concerns, resulting from the recently announced changes, and provide school boards with the support and resources needed, to ensure the safety and success of our students and staff. We respectfully request that at minimum, you may wish to consider delaying implementing changes, to coincide with the 2019-2020 school year; this will give boards and families a better chance at achieving successful transitions.

Sincerely,



Kevin Berry
Chairperson
SEAC



Brandy Rafeek
Vice-chairperson
SEAC

c: Doug Downey, MPP, Springwater Oro-Medonte
Jill Dunlop, MPP, Simcoe North
Andrea Khanjin, MPP, Barrie-Innisfil
Jim Wilson, MPP, Simcoe-Grey
Hon. Caroline Mulroney, MPP, York-Simcoe
Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA)
Jodi Lloyd, Chairperson, SCDSB
Steve Blake, Director of Education, SCDSB
John Dance, Associate Director of Education, SCDSB
Chris Samis, Superintendent of Program and Special Education, SCDSB