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For Immediate Release

'Seriously flawed' special education funding model puts children at risk, say Ontario's education leaders

Superintendents, Directors offer help to solve 'mismatch' of funding, needs

The organization representing superintendents and directors in Ontario's public school boards is speaking out about the inadequacy of the government's special education funding model. Today, the Ontario Public Supervisory Officials' Association, released a position paper detailing the mismatch between funding and needs and offered help to solve the priority issues.

Notes Frances McKenna, OPSOA president and superintendent with the York Region District School Board, "The current funding model does not recognize or address the current and growing needs of special education students. Our members face this mismatch daily, as needs and expectations of parents and students exceed the resources school districts can commit. The model is seriously flawed—and special education students will not be served by a band-aid solution. They deserve better."

Says McKenna, "OPSOA believes it has a responsibility to influence the availability of appropriate resources for the learning needs of all students. Though there are many parts of the overall funding model for education that need attention, fixing the funding for Ontario's over 200,000 special education students is a priority, because special education funding impacts on all students."

Highlights McKenna, "As an organization of senior education officials, we felt the need to voice our mounting concern with the disparity between funding and delivery of special education services within our boards individually—and within the province collectively."

In the position paper, OPSOA identifies the following five key concerns:

- The Ministry of Education has never defined the expectations regarding service by boards to students with special needs or the real cost of funding such service.
- The current funding model for special education is seriously flawed.
- The current special education funding model does not respond to the current diversity of delivery systems among the 72 school districts.
- The current funding model for special education requires a major overhaul so that it responds to expressed principles and standards of delivery that are publicly and professionally acceptable.
- If the current model is maintained, then additional funds will be required to meet the legislative and policy directions of the ministry.

"The government's contention that the special education funding formula provides adequate funds to meet the needs of special education students is simply not true," says Beverley Freedman, member of OPSOA board of directors with responsibility for special education, and superintendent with the Durham District School Board, "Using the Ministry of Education's own figures, school boards in Ontario are spending over \$100 million **more** than the allocation for this school year. Boards are doing their best to meet the needs of some of our most vulnerable children, but in doing so are drawing much-needed funds from other parts of the budget. This only underscores the inherent failure of the formula to match funds with needs. OPSOA does not believe this can continue."

Continues Freedman, "This is not about an argument over numbers—this is about an erosion of services. There are major groups of students with special needs who were previously eligible but, due to the changes in the model's identification criteria are no longer eligible. These include students with behavioral, mild intellectual disability with other presenting factors, and learning disabled students without ADHD. Beyond this group, it doesn't take a financial expert to know that less money and more students means less service per student. Nor does there seem to be any connection between the funding model and the kinds of programs needed to address the needs of special education students across the province."

Notes Terry Lynch, OPSOA past-president and director of education of the Simcoe County District School Board, "The ministry has indicated that it will 'tinker' with the formula. That is not enough. Students deserve more than a band-aid solution. Instead, we see a need for a serious look at fixing this flawed model."

In the position paper, OPSOA commits to:

- assist staff in the Ministry of Education to develop a funding model for special education services that will be more responsive to the reality of needs
- continue to collaborate jointly with Catholic and French-language colleagues to serve as the ministry would find helpful, to ensure that the needs of those distinct systems are included in any solution
- work with trustees, school councils, SEACs, parents and other community partners to inform parents of the changes to special education and their ramifications and to work together to find solutions

Says Freedman, "Representatives from this organization have met as part of a consortium, through the summer, with senior ministry officials. We are prepared to continue to do so in an attempt to reach a suitable resolution to a substantial mismatch so that the frustrations of school board professionals, parents, the Minister's Advisory Committee on Special Education, trustees and numerous stakeholder groups in the education sector can be resolved. Boards need short-term relief to cope with growth and the increased demand on service. Boards need more flexibility to respond to local needs. In the long-term, the special education framework needs to be reviewed and re-designed."

Concludes McKenna, "OPSOA wants the government to commit now to restoring the level of service for special education students to at least the level of service committed by the school boards in this province in 1997. Our students and their parents deserve more than we can provide today."

The Ontario Public Supervisory Officials' Association represents superintendents and directors in public district school boards in Ontario.

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NOTE TO MEDIA: A copy of the position paper is available by calling Kathy Sanford at OPSOA—(905) 845-7003.