



Autism Ontario's Response to
From Great to Excellent: Building the Next Phase in Ontario's
Education Strategy

Autism Ontario

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Acknowledgements

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About Autism Ontario

Autism Ontario is a not-for-profit charitable organization founded in 1973 and has been a strong collective voice for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families in local communities for 40 years.

Autism Ontario supports 25 Chapters in most regions across Ontario, all of which are under the leadership of committed and skilled volunteers who organize and support parent-to-parent contact, provide official Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) representation for ASD in boards of education, camps and public awareness forums.

Autism Ontario advocates for greater investment in the education of students with ASD at all levels of government and strongly believes **students with ASD have what they need to learn at their maximum potential regardless of geographical and/or financial situation.**

The organization advocates on behalf of families affected by ASD through providing strategic advice to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services on the most effective ways to meet the needs of students with ASD in Ontario. By working closely with the Ministry of Education, School Boards, Schools, parents and all other relevant government agencies, Autism Ontario strives to build greater co-operation and understanding of the issues and needs of students with ASD.

In 2007, Autism Ontario participated in the creation of *Making a Difference for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Ontario Schools: From Evidence to Action*, a report created by the Joint Ministers' Autism Spectrum Disorders Reference Group responsible for advising the Minister of Child and Youth Services on effective, evidence-based educational practices to meet the wide range of needs of students with ASD. Autism Ontario continued to provide input to through the *Collaborative Services Delivery Model for Students with ASD* committee and the development of the Connections Program.

In 2008, Autism Ontario hosted an online questionnaire on Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 140; surveying Ontario parents of elementary and secondary students enrolled in Ontario's publicly funded schools. The questionnaire asked families about four main aspects of the policy resulting in identifying the need for ASD training, the need for individualized programming and the need for a greater respect and acceptance of PPM-140. Autism Ontario has continued to represent the voices of parents of students with ASD to the Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education.

In its work with families through Autism Ontario's Potential Program (2012-2013 report) highlighting six years of responsive service to Ontario families, 18% of families surveyed reported experiencing issues related to education and school – the highest area of need among a dozen categories related to service delivery needs.

Autism Ontario continues to listen and advocate on behalf of people and families affected by autism in the Ontario education system and knows that school issues continue to remain one of the most significant areas of challenge to families affected by ASD and the reason why you must give these recommendations strong consideration.

Autism Ontario has been entirely supportive of a special education system that “enables students to acquire, demonstrate, and apply the knowledge and skills necessary to maximize their potential for school and beyond” (Autism Ontario's Response to Special Education Transformation, 2006) and applauds the recognition that students need access to the appropriate supports, services, programs, and range of placement that they need so that they can achieve their potential. This holds true for all students in our school system.

Building the Next Phase in Ontario's Education Strategy

Question 1

What are the skills, knowledge and characteristics students need to succeed after they have completed school, and how do we better support all learners in their development?

- During their time in school, students must be given the opportunity to learn to develop strong communication skills. These skills allow for the lifelong ability to clearly articulate wants and feelings, the ability to recall events, build relationships, hold conversations or convey an answer. Communication in social and job contexts are very important and hinge on social awareness.
- Students need the opportunity in school to learn and then practice varied ways of communicating through writing or speaking and by using verbal or nonverbal communication. These types of communication require important foundations of referencing and environmental awareness. Students with ASD must be taught understanding and participation from contextual cues *in various environments*.

- All learners must be provided the opportunity to understand and practice pro-social behaviour. This does not stay limited to the anti-bullying days or popular social movements like 'Me to We' where students are encouraged to think in global terms rather than local behavior. In addition, students must be encouraged to apply critical thinking, ethical reasoning, moral considerations and broad humanitarian and environmental values in meaningful ways to their daily environments.
- Students with ASD must be provided opportunities to explore and learn about boundaries, including both implied and explicit ones as well as proximity/personal space and while strengthening executive functioning skills (i.e. planning, organizing, and privacy). Issues associated with sharing information, privacy and safety must be considered here too for a learners overall safety.
- Students must be provided opportunities to strengthen their critical thinking skills by using different context/environmental cues, practicing access and self-advocacy, strengthening organization, using social media, employing decision making/problem solving.
- Opportunities to build self-esteem must be provided to learners. This includes the removal of benchmarking grades designed to measure and sort children. Students with non-credit gaining status may find themselves segregated which facilitates warehousing and a "warm, safe and dry strategy - similar to daycare provision - minus the engagement."
- Students must be invited to explore self-awareness and must be invited to participate in their education. Helping learners to understand their personal learning profile is important. Opportunities to address their individual strengths and weaknesses, explore the best fit for community experience through work placements, building independence, and using skills to work as part of a team must be developed. Schools must help students and their families to identify a network of support beyond the school environment, to build a bridge in support of successfully transitioning a person from high school out into the community. Schools must provide students with the knowledge to access information and navigate the system.

- Schools must work towards fostering student's creativity, building flexibility, inspiring life-long learners, developing an ability to accept change, strengthening problem-solving on top of the essential adaptive skill set such as life skills or hygiene skills that all students must learn.

Question 2

What does student well-being mean to you and what is the role of the school in supporting it?

Student well-being extends beyond the physical state. Student well-being must also consider both mental and emotional safety too.

Physical safety: Students are free from harm or malice/bullying and feel secure in their school.

Mental safety: School programming must contain inclusionary practices. Lesson planning must be inclusive to all students and the universal instructional design must not rely on accommodations to participate where the onus on teacher to fulfill those accommodations and the parent is left to track their effectiveness.

Emotional safety: Each student with ASD must feel a sense of belonging as a part of their community before and after graduation. This means feeling respected, wanted and cared about in an inclusive environment built on mutual respect, trust and secure relationships.

The role of the school in supporting student well-being means:

- Self-regulation skills are taught and then generalized across a variety of environments. Students with ASD must be taught to identify situations and the potential strategy options to successfully remain, adapt, and adjust.
- The level of instruction must be matched to development level or learner profile.
- Students must be supported with transitions between environments and between programs. Schools must work to create bridges from one relationship to another.

“Learning profiles” must not be interpreted based on the individual’s diagnosis, but on their individual style of learning.

Despite their shared characteristics, not all students with ASD have the same learning style or needs. Perhaps the time has come to consider education within the same paradigm as Accessibility. AODA legislation clearly points to the requirement of businesses and organizations in Ontario to look through the lens of access for all; at a *systems* level. Education points in the opposite direction looking to fit student needs to the education system in an individualized manner. The net result of this requirement is tax existing resources causing the perception of “burden” to be attributed to the student with the exceptionality. An individualized approach is difficult to execute as it is expertise driven, reactive and based on clients; unsustainable.

Common and widely used categories of various types of learning styles from Neil Fleming's VARK model and neuro-linguistics programming, suggestion that learners can be considered within five basic learning styles:

1. visual learners;
2. auditory learners;
3. reading-writing preference learners;
4. kinesthetic learners; or
5. tactile learners.

All students in a given class may exhibit tendencies in one or all of these categories. By understanding the profiles of a class composition; educators/ teachers can reduce the amount of individualized planning through implementation of broader strategies designed to impact representative learner groups. Targeted teaching styles and lesson planning may then be implemented proportionally to the ratio of learners in a class. This lens through which planning and instruction is carried out better fulfills the suggested mandate of education policy detailed in the duly named “Education for All”.

Rather than attempt to categorize, prioritize and individually plan complex programming for individual exceptionalities, access strategies suggest that planning may be limited seven strategies to address needs and accommodations across exceptionalities.

Two scholars who promote this VARK approach are Dr. Rita Dunn and Dr. Kenneth Dunn.

While learning styles will be different among students across classrooms, Dunn & Dunn suggest that teachers should make changes in their classroom that will be beneficial to every learning style.

This philosophy is consistent with the underpinnings of accessibility legislation which promotes accessibility at the moment of design and creation NOT as an “add-on” to the regular way that we operate. Examples of the system/ foundation level changes include: room redesign; alternate format for access to information, technology and the development of small-group techniques. Re-designing a classroom may include: arranging classroom furniture in the room creatively. For example, learning stations; subject specific instructional areas, additional technology, and using alternate work spaces.

Educators are encouraged to teach across all of the learning modalities through the employment of techniques including creation of instructional plans that use:

1. clearly presented learning goals;
2. multi-sensory resources (auditory, visual, tactile, kinesthetic);
3. activities to demonstrate learning; ways that the information can be used creatively;
4. the sharing of creative projects within small groups;
5. at least three small-group techniques;
6. a pre diagnostic assessment, a self-test, and evaluation

Question 3

From your perspective, what further opportunities exist to close gaps and increase equity to support all children and students in reaching their full potential?

The further opportunities that exist are as follows:

- The quality of education must be consistent within and across school boards. Clearly defined expectations and subject matter expertise is crucial.

- Improvement in the quality of instruction. Temple Grandin, the world-renowned scientist diagnosed with ASD as a child says: “I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a good teacher. A good teacher is worth his or her weight in gold.”
- Not all teachers teaching special education in Ontario have a special education certification. This should be a requirement. Further, the special education certification should have higher standards and should require teachers to have deeper knowledge of specific disabilities.
- All school boards should have a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst (BCBA) on staff. All teachers should have: (a) some ABA training which is research based; (b) knowledge of the fundamental aspects of ASD (including the causes of behavioural and learning challenges in this population); and (c) generally speaking, an awareness of specific disabilities and mental health issues. Autism Ontario strongly supports ASD and ABA training in teacher’s certification programs in addition to the training school boards provide.
- Educators should have access, through the Ministry, to appropriate standard measurement tools and should be trained on how to implement them.
- Educational and/or Teachers’ Assistants should be regulated by law, to ensure appropriate conduct, suitability for registration, and educational training standards. Training standards should be determined by the Ministry, in consultation with community groups. Teachers’ Assistants should be declared an essential service and therefore not be able to strike.
- School boards should have a specialized employee group that has TA/EAs trained as both Instructor Therapists and TA/EAs. They would be assigned to a maximum of 1 or 2 students with ASD.
- The TA/EAs should have ready access to their assigned students’ IEP. This is essential to ensure TA/EAs have a complete understanding of the student’s strengths, weaknesses, goals, accommodations and modifications.
- School boards should be required to collaborate with students, parents, educators, community supports and clinical specialists both in, and outside of, the education system. At present, many schools and school boards resist input from specialists outside their board, and often discourage or prohibit such collaboration.

- All school boards should be required to make available a full range of placement options, with an appropriate balance of inclusion, integration and segregation to provide an education appropriate for the individual student. Students with ASD do not learn the same way as neuro-typicals, and their needs may not be appropriately addressed in an exclusively integrated setting though this can positively impact social skills. Decisions regarding the appropriate balance should be made in a student-centered fashion, and not as a result of funding constraints, which is common practice in school boards. This means that teachers must discover where each of their students are academically, socially, and culturally to determine how best to facilitate learning.
- School board administrators and educators should be required to take into account all available assessments relating to a student's needs and diagnoses in determining the appropriate placement and services. Currently, some boards/educators disregard medical and psychological assessments in favour of educational assessments. For example, a student with a diagnosis of high functioning ASD does not necessarily need fewer supports. With ASD in particular, individuals have highly individualized learning needs.
- Social skills must be assessed and individualized and an evidence-based program must be developed and included in the student's IEP. The implementation must be evaluated on an ongoing basis. Social skills must be explicitly taught and generalized across settings.
- There should be a greater focus on experiential learning and co-op placements. This is critical for many students with ASD, who need to learn about real-life applications of what they have been taught in class.
- Programming, in general, must be ASD specific for this group of students. This may not mean an actual curriculum change, but more of a change in how the curriculum is taught.
- The possibility of vocational opportunities cannot be underestimated, when doors are opened for students to experience new skills. When educators take the initiative to engage all students, good things happen. The education system in Ontario contains some exceptional educators who demonstrate skill, compassion, and commitment to students with ASD. We acknowledge their contribution to our children's lives. It takes work but the end result is a student that loves learning and is willing to step outside their safety zone. A teacher enrolled a student with ASD in an after school-cooking club although he hadn't signed up. Another student was

assigned to walk him to that classroom. He now attends this extra-curricular activity every week and loves it, proudly bringing home his creation and the recipe to his parents.

Question 4

How does the education system need to evolve as a result of changes to childcare and the implementation of full-time kindergarten?

A child with ASD generally shows characteristics of autism before their 3rd birthday. With the implementation of full-time kindergarten and children entering the school system younger, educators need to be better educated about developmental disabilities. The education system needs to evolve as follows:

- Funding should not exclusively reflect enrollment. The need within specialized populations continues to increase as the total enrollment decreases.
- Ensure that the cost of full-time kindergarten does not impact funding designated to other programs and resources.
- Allow ABA therapists into the schools. ABA therapy has been well documented as a research based therapy that is strongly recommended for children showing characteristics of autism. Many children start this therapy by the age of 2 or 3 and continue until they attend school full-time. Therapy schedules are 1:1 for up to 6 hours per day. With full-time kindergarten, parents have to make difficult decisions regarding their child's therapy. Though most school boards have an ABA specialist as a resource person, this is not carried through into the schools.
- Expand the ABA expertise in school boards. Some school boards have many students in the "Connections for Students" transition from IBI to full day school program, others students with ASD are not able to benefit from their expertise. Hiring staff with this expertise would benefit all kindergarten children.
- There should be an increase in the number of regulated health professionals to address concerns in the early years, including speech and language pathologists, and occupational and physical therapists. In many cases, students need direct access to these services, not simply consultation.
- Greater individualization may be required, as full-time kindergarten may be too much for some children; increased rest times/down times may be required.

- Community connections should be encouraged, along with sharing of information/observations regarding the child, from day cares or Early Years Centres (as an example).

Question 5

What more can we do to keep all students engaged, foster their curiosity and creativity, and help them develop a love of life-long learning?

We can do the following:

- Help students with ASD build on their talents such as artwork, writing or computer programming, as their talents and interests may potentially be a future career.
- Become educated about the student's developmental level and the skills that go along with that level.
- Incorporate more art, music, instructional play with supports or drama-play to encourage learning through creativity.
- Increase experiential learning, as learning occurs everywhere. Learning does not only occur in school but also in non-traditional educational environments. Students who learn differently need a wide range of learning alternatives.
- Offer extra-curricular programs and activities that are helpful for students with ASD (who are often isolated due to deficiencies in social and communication skills). To belong and feel welcome for most is to have friends and to participate in extra-curricular activities. Such programs might include mentorship programs, peer advocates that are 'cool kids', activities that welcome diversity and co-op programs available with TA/EA support.

Question 6

How can we use technology more effectively in teaching and learning?

Technology is our present and our future. Many students with ASD depend on technology to communicate, learn, complete homework assignments and decrease anxiety. Technology needs to be supported with teaching how to use it appropriately

and effectively. It can assist a student with communication and organizing time/events. Unfortunately not all school boards have the same access to technology.

Technology can be used more effectively by:

- Increasing opportunities for access to technology within schools although not all schools have equal access due to resources. Technology such as iPad apps and Smartboards are interactive and hands on, which is important for the visual learner (most students with ASD). iPad apps can be individually programmed and therefore are more meaningful and useful for particular students. Keyboards allow students that struggle with writing (decreased motor skills) to complete type written assignments.
- Exploring search engines such as Google encourages children to read, do research and entertain them (reward).
- Collaboration of multi-disciplinary teams (SLP, Psychologist, OT) to support program development and provisions of accommodations for students with ASD.
- Increasing opportunities to connect with parents and community agencies via email, Facebook, Skype, facetime.
- Utilizing apps that have been developed to assist people with disabilities including ASD to learn various activities of daily living such as banking, cleaning and cooking. These programs can be personalized and are photo progressive learning tools. Individually programmed iPad apps are meaningful and useful. Nadia Hamilton has created such an app for her brother with ASD
- Students mentoring or teaching other students regarding technology would be beneficial creating a sense of teamwork and camaraderie.
- Programming quizzes and tests onto iPads/computers to allow for an alternative method to implement testing

Question 7

In summary, what are the various opportunities for partnerships that can enhance the student experience, and how can they benefit parents, educators, and our partners too?

It takes a village to raise a child. This is particularly true when raising a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Our village includes community partners, neighbours, peers, parents, grandparents and teachers.

Autism Ontario's Mission: **To ensure that each individual with ASD is provided the means to achieve quality of life as a respected member of society.**

Various opportunities for partnerships include:

- Peer mentors and coaches could benefit students with ASD tremendously. Most elementary schools have buddy systems for students with special needs, some being more effective than others. Peer mentors have such a valuable role in teaching/assisting with social skills, social communication, social acceptance, alleviating anxiety for the person with ASD and encouraging a sense of belonging and acceptance.
- Education sectors can partner with agencies that work with children with special needs, to share information and knowledge i.e. family services, community living, mental health agencies.
- Access to collaboration and cooperation with mental health professionals who are familiar with the high levels of anxiety and related mental health issues (mood disorder, ADD, depression) experienced by students with ASD is critical. In all aspects of their lives, individuals with ASD experience a degree of stress that is greater than for any other childhood condition or developmental disability. These stresses affect their education, but are not addressed through curriculum or learning strategies. Early identification of potential problem behaviours, and development of evidence-based strategies to address those behaviours, should be required.
- Cooperation and open communication between parents and the school system. Parents and students should be active participants in the process related to program, service, and accommodation decisions for students with special education needs. Many parents have found the willingness to collaborate varies widely from school to school and class to class and depends largely on the individual educator's views and approach to special education. Parents who face barriers of time (meeting during work hours) and/or language (non-native speakers), who fear a back-lash against their child, or who are intimidated by authority need additional supports to access collaborative activities.

- Schools should be taking initiative to build relationships in the community and across organizations in the social, labour, financial and justice sectors, as a means to prepare students for transition periods and promote better understanding in the community. Through these relationships, organizations and industries can build work relationships and assist in helping students with disabilities find satisfying employment or volunteer opportunities during and following completion of highschool.
- The hiring of “Transition Facilitators” in boards whose responsibility is to ensure post secondary transition planning occurs using ABA strategies and supports co-op placements and experiences. They would work with high schools, students, families, community agencies and colleges/universities/work places to prepare for the transitions. A formal plan would track the progress.
- Round table discussions with the stakeholders which benefit all involved allowing for open dialogue.
- Ministries working together to address concerns and forward the agenda regarding moving the education system forward from ‘better to excellent’.