

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance Update  
United for a Barrier-Free Ontario for All People with Disabilities  
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## **22 Major Disability Organizations Send Premier Wynne an Open Letter Calling for the Wynne Government to Agree to Develop an Education Accessibility Standard under Ontario's Disabilities Act – Check out the Open Letter and AODA Alliance News Release and a Toronto Star Article on This**

December 5, 2016

### **SUMMARY**

Today, 22 major disability organizations, including the AODA Alliance, sent Premier Kathleen Wynne a compelling open letter that calls on her Government to agree to develop an Education Accessibility Standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. As well, the AODA Alliance today issued a news release, to publicize this open letter to the media. The Toronto Star ran an excellent article on this open letter, and the need for the Wynne Government to agree to develop an Education Accessibility Standard. Below you can find:

- \* the AODA Alliance's December 5, 2016 news release
- \* The December 5, 2016 open letter to Premier Wynne, including a list of all the disability organizations that are signatories to it, and
- \* The December 5, 2016 article on this in the Toronto Star.

Here's how you can help:

\* We are eager to get more disability organizations to be signatories to this open letter to Premier Wynne. We are happy to add more signatories, post them on line, and let the Wynne Government know of any additional signatories.

It is not too late for more community organizations to become signatories to this open letter. If your community organization is prepared to be listed as a signatory to the open letter to Premier Wynne, set out below, send an email to us at [aodafeedback@gmail.com](mailto:aodafeedback@gmail.com) Let us know the exact name of your organization, and the name of a senior representative within your organization whom we can use as a contact person. We will update the letter with any additional organizations that tell us they want to join as signatories.

\* Share our open letter, our news release, and the Toronto Star article with your member of the Ontario Legislature. Press him or her to agree to urge the Ontario Government to agree to develop an Education Accessibility Standard under the AODA. Our news release includes helpful links to good background information on this issue, including to our five-year effort to get the Ontario Government to take this action.

\* Encourage your local media to cover this story. Share with your local media any examples of accessibility barriers that students with disabilities face in your community.

You can always send your feedback to us on any AODA and accessibility issue at [aodafeedback@gmail.com](mailto:aodafeedback@gmail.com)

Have you taken part in our “Picture Our Barriers campaign? If not, please join in! You can **get all the information you need about our “Picture Our Barriers” campaign** by visiting [www.aodaalliance.org/2016](http://www.aodaalliance.org/2016)

To sign up for, or unsubscribe from AODA Alliance e-mail updates, write to: [aodafeedback@gmail.com](mailto:aodafeedback@gmail.com)

We encourage you to use the Government’s toll-free number for reporting AODA violations. We fought long and hard to get the Government to promise this, and later to deliver on that promise. If you encounter any accessibility problems at any large retail establishments, it will be especially important to report them to the Government via that toll-free number. Call 1-866-515-2025.

Please pass on our email Updates to your family and friends.

Why not subscribe to the **AODA Alliance’s YouTube channel**, so you can get immediate alerts when we post new videos on our accessibility campaign. <https://www.youtube.com/user/aodaalliance>

Please **"like"** our Facebook page and share our updates: <https://www.facebook.com/Accessibility-for-Ontarians-with-Disabilities-Act-Alliance-106232039438820/>

Follow us on Twitter. Get others to follow us. And please re-tweet our tweets!!  
@AODAAlliance

**Learn all about our campaign for a fully accessible Ontario** by visiting <http://www.aodaalliance.org>

Please also join the campaign for a strong and effective Canadians with Disabilities Act, spearheaded by Barrier-Free Canada. The AODA Alliance is proud to be the Ontario affiliate of Barrier-Free Canada. Sign up for Barrier-Free Canada updates by emailing [info@BarrierFreeCanada.org](mailto:info@BarrierFreeCanada.org)

## **MORE DETAILS**

### **AODA Alliance's December 5, 2016 News Release**

ACCESSIBILITY FOR ONTARIANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT ALLIANCE  
NEWS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Major Disability Organizations' Compelling Open Letter Urges Premier Wynne to Tear Down the Many Accessibility Barriers Still Unfairly Impeding Hundreds of Thousands of Ontario Students with Disabilities**

**December 5, 2016 Toronto:** Today, 22 major disability organizations united to call on Premier Kathleen Wynne to take new action to tear down the many accessibility barriers that impede over a third of a million Ontario students with disabilities from fully participating in Ontario's education system. How do Ontario students who are blind or deaf, or who have an intellectual disability or mental health condition, or a physical or communication disability, or autism, navigate Ontario's education system, which was originally designed to serve students without disabilities?

The open letter, set out below, raises serious concerns from respected organizations with expertise in barriers impeding students with blindness or vision loss and/or deafness or hearing loss, autism, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health conditions, epilepsy, communication disabilities and other disabilities. They urge Premier Wynne to create an Education Accessibility Standard under Ontario's Disabilities Act to spell out actions schools, colleges and universities must take to tear down these barriers. And prevent new ones.

"An Education Accessibility Standard should be designed to remove recurring accessibility barriers in our education system, so students with disabilities and their families don't have to sue one barrier at a time, one education organization at a time," the open letter explains. "This should eliminate the need for each education organization to have to re-invent the same solutions, saving them money."

The Open Letter explains the serious problem facing so many students with disabilities:

"Originally, Ontario's education system was not designed to fully include students with disabilities in the mainstream. As one example, when 2016 began, only 85 of the Toronto District School Board's 550 schools had physical accessibility.

Historically, mainstream classroom teachers were trained to teach students without disabilities. Only special education teachers were trained to teach students with disabilities. Too often, classroom curriculum, gym and playground equipment, and new digital equipment in our education system lack universal design and the accessibility that students with disabilities need."

The Open Letter points to strong support, far beyond the letter's signatories:

"School teachers, university professors, and others working on our education system's front lines, endorse the call for an Education Accessibility Standard, including the [Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario](#), the [Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation](#), the [Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association](#), the [Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations](#) and the [Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario](#). This ensures that an Education Accessibility Standard would be well-received."

At least one of every six students in Ontario-funded schools has special education needs -- 334,000 students across Ontario, 46,000 in Toronto public schools alone. Add to this the number in pre-school and post-secondary programs, or who would attend them, if they could.

Ontario's landmark 2005 Disabilities Act requires the Government to lead Ontario to full accessibility for 1.8 million people with a physical, mental, sensory, intellectual, or other disability by 2025. The Ontario Government must enact and enforce a series of regulations called "accessibility standards" to ensure people with disabilities can fully use schools, universities, jobs, housing, goods, services, restaurants and stores.

"A [2015 Government-appointed Independent Review of Ontario's Disabilities Act](#) shows Ontario is behind schedule to become fully accessible by 2025, the Disabilities Act's deadline," said David Lepofsky, chair of the non-partisan AODA Alliance which spearheads Ontario's grassroots disability accessibility campaign. "An Education Accessibility Standard would help get Ontario back on schedule. It would lend a much-needed hand to so many kids and youth with disabilities who need it. It would help the many working in our schools, colleges and universities who want to ensure that students with disabilities get a good education, so they can later get a good job."

When the Tories questioned Premier Wynne in the Legislature on this during Question Period on October 31, 2016, Premier Wynne said [she's actively considering the call](#) for her Government to create an Education Accessibility Standard.

"The last major Government overhaul of our outdated laws in this area dates far back to 1980, before people with disabilities had rights later guaranteed in the Charter of Rights and Human Rights Code," said Lepofsky. "The Government has been considering our request for over five years. This powerful open letter shows why it's now a good time for the Government to say yes."

Contact: David Lepofsky [aodafeedback@gmail.com](mailto:aodafeedback@gmail.com) [Twitter](#): @davidlepofsky and @aodaalliance [www.aodaalliance.org](http://www.aodaalliance.org)

## Links to Key Background Information

\* For all the **background on the AODA Alliance's 5-year call** for the Ontario Government to agree to create an Education Accessibility Standard under the AODA, visit: [www.aodaalliance.org/education](http://www.aodaalliance.org/education)

\* To see the **AODA Alliance's Discussion Paper** on what an Education Accessibility Standard could include, visit: <http://www.aodaalliance.org/strong-effective-aoda/11212016.asp>

\* **For an illustration of new accessibility barriers in Ontario's education system**, watch the AODA Alliance's captioned **18-minute video on accessibility issues at the new Centennial College Culinary Arts Centre**. **This video** was covered on Friday December 2, 2016 in the [Toronto Star](#), CBC national Radio's "World Report", and CBC national TV's "The National". **The video** is available at:

<https://youtu.be/Dgfrum7e-0#>

\* To watch a shorter **6-minute captioned version of the AODA Alliance's Centennial College Culinary Arts Centre video**, visit:

<https://youtu.be/uRmVBmOy6xg>

## **December 5, 2016 Open Letter to Premier Wynne**

### **Open Letter**

December 5, 2016

To: The Hon. Premier Kathleen Wynne [premier@ontario.ca](mailto:premier@ontario.ca)

cc: Tracy MacCharles, Accessibility Minister [tracy.maccharles@ontario.ca](mailto:tracy.maccharles@ontario.ca)  
Mitzie Hunter, Education Minister [mitzie.hunter@ontario.ca](mailto:mitzie.hunter@ontario.ca)  
Deb Matthews, Advanced Education and Skills Development Minister  
[deb.matthews@ontario.ca](mailto:deb.matthews@ontario.ca)

### **Re: Ontario Should Enact an Education Accessibility Standard**

Too many accessibility barriers impede students with a physical, sensory, intellectual, mental health, learning, communication or other disability from full inclusion in and fully benefitting from Ontario's education system. These barriers persist at all levels of the education system, i.e. pre-school, school, college, university and job training programs around Ontario.

These barriers make it harder for students with disabilities to succeed in Ontario's education system. They contribute to the high unemployment rate among Ontarians with disabilities.

The Ontario Government needs to address this. We offer a constructive solution. The undersigned community organizations ask the Government to develop an Education Accessibility Standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), as [the AODA Alliance](#) has urged.

An Education Accessibility Standard should be designed to remove recurring accessibility barriers in our education system, so students with disabilities and their families don't have to sue one barrier at a time, one education organization at a time. This should eliminate the need for each education organization to have to re-invent the same solutions, saving them money.

An Education Accessibility Standard would better serve students with disabilities. It would better support the efforts of the many dedicated people working throughout our education system, who want to ensure that students with disabilities can fully benefit from education programs. It would reinforce Ontario's commitment to achieve an accessible province, as the Federal Government develops national accessibility legislation for the federal sphere.

### **1. Why Ontario Needs an Education Accessibility Standard**

There are at least 334,000 students with special education needs in Ontario's publicly-funded schools, one of six students. In addition to them, large numbers of students with disabilities study in Ontario colleges or universities, or want to do so.

Former Lieutenant Governor David Onley, the Government's Special Accessibility Advisor, says the unemployment rate facing people with disabilities in Canada is not only a national crisis, but a national shame. We add that a good education is essential to get a good job. The Ontario Government is commendably planning a disability employment strategy. An effective disability employment strategy needs to include an Education Accessibility Standard.

Originally, Ontario's education system was not designed to fully include students with disabilities in the mainstream. As one example, when 2016 began, only 85 of the Toronto District School Board's 550 schools had physical accessibility.

Historically, mainstream classroom teachers were trained to teach students without disabilities. Only special education teachers were trained to teach students with disabilities. Too often, classroom curriculum, gym and playground equipment, and new digital equipment in our education system lack universal design and the accessibility that students with disabilities need.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission's ground-breaking 2003 report, [The Opportunity To Succeed: Achieving Barrier-Free Education For Students With Disabilities](#), documented serious education accessibility barriers. Despite some progress, too many of these persist today.

In 2015, the Ontario Government hired KPMG to review our education system's accessibility barriers, and other jurisdictions' measures to address these. According to the [AODA Alliance's detailed analysis](#), [the KPMG Report](#) shows our education system has serious accessibility barriers. The KPMG Report doesn't show an Education Accessibility Standard is unnecessary.

Many teachers, professors and others in our education system, and in the Ontario Government, now try to ensure that students with disabilities can be fully included in education programs. An Education Accessibility Standard would help them better serve students with disabilities.

## **2. What an Education Accessibility Standard Could Do**

To its great credit, in 2005, the Ontario Legislature unanimously passed the Government's AODA. The AODA requires the Ontario Government to lead Ontario to become fully accessible to people with disabilities by 2025. There has been progress since then. Yet Ontario's education system is not on schedule to reach full accessibility by 2025.

The Government can choose to create an AODA accessibility standard for a sector, like education, to address its accessibility barriers. Your Government enacted a Transportation Accessibility Standard and committed to develop a Health Care Accessibility Standard.

An Education Accessibility Standard can set measures for educational organizations, like school boards, colleges and universities, to take to remove and prevent recurring accessibility barriers,

in mainstream or segregated classrooms. We can learn what has worked inside and outside Ontario, from school boards, colleges, universities, other education organizations, and students with disabilities. The Standard can set varying time lines for action, depending on an educational organization's size and resources. It can establish a modernized process to ensure that students with disabilities and their families have proper input into how they are accommodated.

A helpful [AODA Alliance Discussion Paper](#) offers food for thought. It proposes:

- a) The Education Accessibility Standard's purpose should be to ensure that our education system becomes fully accessible to students with disabilities by 2025. Removing and preventing accessibility barriers lets students with disabilities be fully included in our education system.
- b) The Standard should apply to education programming in Ontario, including all schools and school boards, whether or not publicly funded, colleges, universities, job training programs, experiential learning programs, and pre-school programs.
- c) The Standard should address accessibility barriers facing students with any disabilities, not just the disabilities which Ontario's 36-year-old outdated special education laws recognize. This should include a physical, mental, sensory, intellectual, mental health, learning, communication, neurological or other kind of disability.

The [AODA Alliance's Discussion Paper](#) proposes that the Standard can and should include:

- a) systematic measures to make it easier to include students with disabilities in the mainstream, where appropriate.
- b) accessibility requirements for the education system's built environment e.g. schools, colleges and universities.
- c) digital accessibility requirements for our education system. Computers, tablets, online learning resources and libraries, and smart technologies rapidly expand in the education system. Yet no comprehensive measures ensure the digital learning environment's accessibility.
- d) provincial standards on letting students with disabilities bringing a service animal to school.
- e) measures ensuring accessible instructional materials are available when students with disabilities need them.
- f) measures ensuring curriculum is designed based on principles of "Universal Design in Learning" (UDL), to be accessible for students with disabilities, e.g. addressing accessibility barriers to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) curriculum.
- g) measures to eliminate attitudinal barriers among students without disabilities that impede the full inclusion of students with disabilities.
- h) measures to ensure that testing/assessments accurately assess students with disabilities.

- i) measures addressing accessibility barriers in admission criteria for educational programs.
- j) measures ensuring students with disabilities can fully participate in experiential learning.
- k) measures ensuring sufficient teacher training on teaching students with disabilities.
- l) measures removing barriers impeding students with disabilities and their families from prompt access to information needed to fully participate in education programs like schools, e.g. options for them and how to access them.
- m) measures removing bureaucratic procedural barriers that can impede effective accommodation of individual students with disabilities at all levels of our education system e.g. creating a fair process for students with disabilities to take part in decisions regarding their education accommodation needs, and to appeal if results are insufficient or are not implemented.

The [KPMG Report](#) documents measures in other jurisdictions from which our education system can benefit. They are not the only measures this Standard should address. The undersigned organizations will want to consult their communities and present suggestions.

### **3. Substantial Support for an Education Accessibility Standard**

School teachers, university professors, and others working on our education system's front lines, endorse the call for an Education Accessibility Standard, including the [Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario](#), the [Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation](#), the [Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association](#), the [Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations](#) and the [Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario](#). This ensures that an Education Accessibility Standard would be well-received.

You wrote the AODA Alliance [on May 14, 2014](#), committing that your Government may create an Education Accessibility Standard. The 2014 Government-appointed [AODA Independent Review Report](#) said an Education Accessibility Standard is a priority.

### **4. We Are Eager to Help the Government of Ontario**

Please appoint an AODA Education Standards Development Committee. That Committee would bring together the disability community, schools, colleges, universities and others, to make recommendations on what the Education Accessibility Standard should include. The Government should let that Committee consult the public, including students with disabilities and their families, on the full range of education barriers. The Government has final say on what to include in an Education Accessibility Standard, after reviewing the Committee's advice.

We are eager to work with your Government, school boards, colleges, universities and all educational organizations to help create an Education Accessibility Standard that will make Ontario proud and a leader on accessibility.

The following organizations endorse and are signatories to this letter.

1. Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance
2. Canadian National Institute for the Blind CNIB
3. March of Dimes Canada
4. Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario
5. Canadian Mental Health Association –Toronto
6. Arch Disability Rights Law Centre
7. Canadian Hearing Society
8. Autism Ontario
9. Views for the Visually Impaired
10. Citizens with Disabilities Ontario
11. Communication Disabilities Access Canada
12. Holland Bloorview Kids Rehab Hospital
13. Deaf Blind Services Ontario
14. Community Living Ontario
15. Stop Gap Foundation
16. Inclusive Design Resource Centre, Ontario College of Art and Design University
17. [Physicians of Ontario Neurodevelopmental Advocacy](#)
18. Autism Action Coalition
19. [DisAbled Women’S Network of Canada \(DAWN Canada\)](#)
20. Epilepsy Toronto
21. Epilepsy Ontario
22. Spinal Cord Injury Ontario

## **December 5,2016 Toronto Star Article on the Open Letter to Premier Wynne**

The Toronto Star December 5, 2016

Greater Toronto

Groups urge premier to give disabled students a better education; Only 85 of TDSB's 550 schools offer accessibility, hindering learning process for youth in classrooms

Rana Nasrazadani, who has cerebral palsy, says there are definitely gaps that need to be addressed in order for students to be successful. CHRIS SO/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Students in wheelchairs who can't use playground equipment or open classroom doors. Children with impaired vision or dyslexia unable to read the Smartboard in class. Youth with autism who miss out on co-op placements because workplaces don't accommodate their needs.

These are just a few examples of obstacles faced by special needs students from preschool to university who aren't getting the education they're entitled to, according to a group of almost two dozen community groups.

Their solution: an education accessibility standard across Ontario. On Monday, the 22 groups will ask Premier Kathleen Wynne for that commitment, arguing it would be a monumental step toward providing special needs kids with classroom settings, curriculum and teaching that are vital to their futures.

"These barriers make it harder for students with disabilities to succeed in Ontario's education system," the groups say in a five-page letter to be sent to Wynne.

"They contribute to the high unemployment rate among Ontarians with disabilities."

The letter notes that education is essential to getting a job at a time when unemployment levels for disabled adults is "not only a national crisis, but a national shame."

The letter is signed by the CNIB, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, the Canadian Hearing Society and groups representing those with autism, spinal cord injury, epilepsy and a range of other intellectual and sensory conditions. The proposal has also been endorsed by five unions representing teachers and educators at all levels.

"The goal of a standard like this is to get everybody on the same page and provide some kind of equal starting point," said Robert Lattanzio, executive director of Toronto-based Arch Disability Law Centre, one of the signatories.

Having a consistent baseline in Ontario that guarantees access to all kinds of support would help the one in six students receiving special-ed services learn to the best of their abilities and reach their potential, he added.

Arch hears from parents across the province seeking legal help to fight for the supports their children have been promised. The letter to Wynne argues that a new standard would mean families "don't have to sue one barrier at a time, one education organization at a time."

It would also save the province money because school boards wouldn't have to "reinvent the same solutions."

Rana Nasrazadani of Toronto recalls her own frustration with barriers she faced in high school. She used a walker because of her cerebral palsy and often found herself stranded in corridors because she couldn't open doors. Sometimes she was marked late for class as she stood outside waiting for someone to help her in.

Her individual education plan (IEP) entitled her to extensions on assignments, said Nasrazadani, 20. But if teachers didn't comply, she didn't know how to fight for her rights. "It added a lot of stress," said Nasrazadani, now a student in human rights and equity studies at York University.

"There are really some gaps that need to be addressed in order for students to be successful."

Under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the province is committed to becoming accessible by 2025 and has highlighted five key areas of focus, including transportation and employment.

The 22 organizations urge Wynne to also make education a priority and address outdated special-education laws that don't include such disabilities as sensory, communications and mental-health conditions.

The province is "open to considering other accessibility standards, including in the area of education," a spokesperson for Tracy MacCharles, the minister responsible for accessibility, said Friday.

"We know the current system isn't working, we know families feel under a lot of pressure," said Toronto lawyer David Lepofsky, head of grassroots group the AODA Alliance, which monitors accessibility in the province.

As of early this year, only 85 of the Toronto District School Board's 550 schools were physically accessible, said Lepofsky, also chair of the TDSB special education advisory committee.

Developing an education standard would also mean a fundamental shift toward creating a universal design for schools, curriculum and teaching strategies aimed at a broader range of students, rather than relying on an old mainstream model that involves "shoehorning" special-needs kids into an environment that doesn't fit, Lepofsky said.

Making schools more accessible is also a priority for student groups like the Ontario Student Trustees' Association, which recently made a video highlighting examples of learning initiatives aimed at including all students.

It's an issue "that affects every single one of us," said Dasha Metropolitansky, a trustee who's in Grade 11 at White Oaks Secondary School in Oakville.

"It's about forming a connection with your peers," she said. "If there's an issue that affects your classmate, you should care."

And creating classrooms environments that are easier for all students to engage and participate in "is just better for learning, for staff and for students."

Andrea Gordon Toronto Star