

Ministry of Education ASD Initiatives and What They Mean for You

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“PPM 140” — not a very inspiring name, is it, for something to inspire such hope and discussion? This Policy/Program Memorandum from the Ministry of Education was the subject of several presentations at the recent Autism Ontario President’s Council and SEAC Training, and this article is one person’s view: except where information is quoted directly from the PPM, this is just what I heard and how I interpreted it. In other words, there’s no use shaking this article in front of your principal and saying “but Laurie says...”.

About the PPM

First, what is a PPM? A PPM is a document created by the Ministry of Education that sets out directions for individual school boards in the province. Apparently PPM 140, titled “Incorporating Methods of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) into Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)”, is the first PPM that directs not just what the school board is to do or provide, but gives specifics on how — the teaching approaches to be used. You should read and print the seven page PPM for yourself: go to www.autismontario.com and click on the link on the home page.

Some important notes to keep in mind:

- *As speaker after speaker reminded us, schools boards are autonomous organizations, and there are limits on what the Ministry can require them to do. Interpreting and applying PPM 140, or any PPM, is very much the responsibility of the individual board.*
- *The PPM has nothing to do with the provincial IBI program. It does not mean that IBI therapists are to be included in the classroom, or that IBI will be delivered at school. During the provincial election campaign, Minister Wynne made some sort of statement about IBI in the schools, but until the cabinet reconvenes, it is unclear what she meant by that.*
- *The PPM deals with ABA as a teaching method/strategy that can be applied by educators in the classroom. It has nothing to do with placement — that is, it does not in any way indicate that students needing instruction based on ABA need to be in a particular classroom environment. It is intended as a way to support the child’s school day, wherever that day may be spent.*

The PPM is based on the recommendations from the Minister’s Reference Group on ASD, which included an assortment of members including representatives from Autism Ontario. It sets out two requirements, described below.

First Requirement of PPM

The first requirement says “School boards must offer students with ASD special education programs and services including, where appropriate, special education programs using ABA methods.” Note the “must” — this is the strongest statement a PPM can make. Note also the “where appropriate” — this was something the reference group wanted to include, recognizing that ABA methods are not appropriate or desirable for every student. It is not intended as a loophole for boards to refuse to offer programs based on their belief that it is not appropriate, although that won’t stop some boards from using it that way. If told that these methods are not appropriate, you should ask for a justification. Then you’ll be in a better position to respond.

The PPM talks about “programs”, but the rest of the prose talks about teaching strategies in a more general way: nothing in the PPM indicates that school boards need to establish separate ABA-based programs that approximate therapy or offer specialized environments.

In practical terms, this requirement means that principals need to ensure an IEP incorporates ABA teaching methods. If this is done, the resources needed to provide those teaching methods in the

classroom (typically, this is handled through training for the classroom staff — nothing in the PPM requires school boards to hire specialized staff for those purposes) cannot be denied. And we have been told that considerable funds for this training have been distributed to boards — however, boards are not required to spend the money for that purpose.

Second Requirement of PPM

The second requirement is that “School board staff must plan for the transition between various activities and settings involving students with ASD.” This refers not just to transitions between school settings, but also transition during the school day. It says that community service professionals already working with the child should be involved in such planning.

The PPM also states that the implementation of these requirements will be monitored, through the Minister’s Advisory Council on Special Education.

Collaboration Focus of PPM

The PPM makes several mentions of school boards collaborating with “community personnel” (including therapists, social workers, representatives of service providers, and so on) and with parents. It calls such collaboration “essential”. It particularly refers to this collaboration for the IEP, saying that principals “must” ensure such people participate in the IEP process.

What the PPM Appears to Mean by “ABA”

The PPM’s details about ABA are where I personally have my greatest quibbles. It promotes the use of ABA strategies primarily (although not exclusively) for behaviours such as staying on task, and gives less emphasis to using it when teaching academic skills. It talks about individualized programming, positive reinforcement (although negative reinforcement, the removal of something from the environment, is equally, if not more, applicable in a school setting), data collection and analysis, and generalization. It does not talk explicitly about breaking tasks into small components, which is typically used in ABA. It fails to offer a definition of “behaviour”, something that would be enormously helpful in dealing with educational staff who think “not paying attention” is a behaviour.

What the PPM Means for You

The PPM makes it possible for you to insist that ABA strategies be included in your child’s IEP: it does not make it possible for you to insist that a board-certified behaviour analyst or other behavioural expert be involved in developing (or delivering) your child’s education. Before you approach your school about the PPM, you should read the document for yourself so you’re aware of its contents. You should also keep in mind that your principal or classroom teacher is not likely to be intimately aware of PPM-140: for us in the ASD community it might be a big deal, but for a school administrator it’s just another in a long list of Ministry requirements.

There’s a fine line I think we need to walk — if we make the delivery of ABA-based education sound too clinical, teachers and administrators will resist it. If we make it sound like just a common sense way of teaching, teachers and administrators will dismiss it, or claim to do it already.

if nothing else, this PPM is a positive indication that the Ministry has a commitment to ASD, and has led to increased funding for training for school staff. The PPM also promotes a much-needed collaborative environment with community partners.