

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

Wednesday, April 7, 2021, 7:00 pm
Zoom Meeting

- Members:** Christine Boothby (Trustee), Rob Campbell (Trustee), Chris Ellis (Trustee), Sonia Nadon-Campbell (Community Representative), Susan Cowin (Community Representative), Jim Harris (VOICE for deaf and hard of hearing children), Terry Warner (VOICE for deaf and hard of hearing children, Alternate), Cathy Miedema (Association for Bright Children), Mark Wylie (Down Syndrome Association), Lisa Paterick (VIEWS for the Visually Impaired), Katie Ralph (Autism Ontario, Ottawa Chapter), Ian Morris (Ontario Associations for Families of Children with Communication Disorders), Dr. Maggie Mamen (Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton), Safina Dewshi (Ottawa-Carleton Assembly of School Councils)
- Association Representatives (Non Voting):** Jennifer Titley (Ottawa-Carleton Elementary Teachers' Federation), Connie Allen (Professional Student Services Personnel), Catherine Houlden (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Teachers), Andrew Winchester (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Alternate), Kimberly Elmer (Ottawa-Carleton Secondary School Administrators' Network), Nancy Dlouhy (Ottawa-Carleton Elementary Operations Committee)
- Staff and Guests:** Lynn Scott (Trustee), Peter Symmonds (Superintendent of Learning Support Services), Dr. Petra Duschner (Manager of Mental Health and Critical Services), Christine Kessler (System Principal, Learning Support Services), Amy Hannah (System Principal, Learning Support Services), Kathryn Langevin (Supervisor of Social Work), Stacey Kay (Manager, Learning Support Services), Monique Manatch (Facilitator, Indigenous Education Advisory Council) Deepika Grover (Co-chair, Advisory Committee of Equity), Leigh Fenton (Board/Committee Coordinator)

1. Call to Order

Chair Nadon-Campbell called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. She acknowledged that the meeting is taking place on unceded Algonquin Territory and thanked the Algonquin people for hosting the meeting on their land.

2. Approval of the Agenda

Moved by Rob Campbell,

THAT the agenda be approved.

Carried

3. Delegations

There were no delegations.

4. Review of Special Education Advisory Committee Report

4.1 3 March 2021 SEAC Report

Moved by Christine Boothby,

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee Report dated 3 March 2021 report be received.

Trustee Boothby proposed that on folio 11, paragraph three, the final sentence read: "Superintendent Symmonds responded that re-applying to programs will not be necessary for the 2022-2023 school year but that he could not commit to the options for the school year."

Moved by Christine Boothby,

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee Report dated 3 March 2021 report be received, as ammended.

Carried

4.2 Forward Agenda

The SEAC forward agenda was provided for information.

5. Discussion

5.1 Memo 21-036, Learning Support Services Operational Review

Your committee had before it Memo 21-036, providing an update on the Learning Support Services (LSS) Operational Review. Superintendent Symmonds noted that in response to the Board motion of 30 October 2018, staff was directed to undertake an operational review of the process for identification, needs assessment and placement for all exceptionalities. In January 2020, the contract was awarded to external consultants and the project was launched. A number of review activities were started, however, the impact of labour action led to the postponement of the scheduled stakeholder focus groups in early March 2020. The provincial school closure due to COVID-19 led to the full pause of the project in April 2020.

Manager Kay summarized the plan to adjust the timing and scope of the review, considering the period of time elapsed from the beginning of the initial framework of the LSS Operational Review and the impact of global events on the community and education system. The following revised timelines were reported:

- 2021-2022 - Implementation of the 'Learning Support for Students with Special Education Needs' resource for OCDSB Staff;
- 2022-2023 - Renew goals and scope and launch a procurement process for external consultants; and
- 2023-2024 - Final report delivered to SEAC and the Board of Trustees in February for recommendation implementation.

Despite delaying the operational review, LSS continues to work to address issues related to communication about the District's approach to providing special education programs and services. LSS is continuing to examine the use of a universal screening tool designed for educators to promote early identification of emerging learning needs and the consistent delivery of high yield supports and services for students with special education needs from all exceptionality groups, whether their educational program is delivered within a specialized program class or regular program class. The revised timelines will allow the opportunity for further evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the tool and may address many of the concerns brought forward.

During discussion and in response to questions, the following points were noted:

- LSS is working with Supply Chain Management to understand best practices on the continuation of the existing contract with consultants;
- SEAC will be consulted on the new scope of work; and
- SEAC and the Board of Trustees were engaged to develop the original scope of work. Labour sanctions and the provincial school closures became a barrier to stakeholder group meetings about the operational review.

Dr. Mamen queried the potential for the OHRC's Right to Read Inquiry recommendations to be incorporated in the future assessments. Manager Kay responded that initiatives of this sort may be factored into the proposed scope of work. She noted that the District is engaged with the Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap and there may be new links to equity and inclusion directives as well. She added that a critical evaluation of the scope will be an important component to re-introducing the operational review.

Superintendent Symmonds stated that once the Right to Read Inquiry recommendations are published, LSS will begin to review the recommendations. The report is expected in April 2021 and it will be circulated to SEAC for discussion.

6. Information

6.1 Report 21-034, Academic Staffing Plan for 2021-2022

Superintendent Symmonds reported that on 30 March 2021, the Board of Trustees approved the Academic Staffing Plan for 2021-2022. He thanked members of SEAC who engaged with LSS in a discussion about priorities and broader staffing themes. The information was helpful in informing some of the direction taken with the academic staffing plan and continues to support the conversations as the overall staff recommended budget is in development. He noted that segments of Report 21-034 were missing from the meeting package and that information will be re-distributed to the committee.

Communication from the provincial government indicated that school boards should not expect the same elevated level of funding that was allocated prior to the launch of the 2020-2021 school year. The assumption by the District is that there will be no additional COVID-19 funding for the coming 2021-2022 school year. The District is anticipating much lower enrollment in the Ottawa Carleton Virtual (OCV) campuses. If additional funding is supplied, the District can examine staffing additions to support student achievement, well-being and safety in our schools.

Changes have been made to the Learning Disability Specialized Intervention Program (LDSIP). It was established to be a partially integrated program with opportunities for students to learn and develop skills within the LDSIP portion of the day, and then an opportunity to generalize the learned skills in a regular classroom with support. Additional staffing resources have been assigned to ensure meaningful opportunities for the LDSIP students in large classrooms. Part-time Learning Resource Teachers (LRTs) are assigned to each of the LDSIP sites to support integration. Going forward LSS has repurposed the LRT and contingency staffing allocations to make full-time classes for LDSIP. To address the need to ensure all students experience the integration portion as intended, the LSS has increased their staff complement, hiring two more itinerant teachers. One itinerant teacher is in place for students with learning disabilities and the intent is to support those students who are leaving the LDSIP this year as they reintegrate back into their home classrooms. The second increase of an itinerant teacher is in place to support the large enrollment numbers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Other expansions to the services in learning support for students have been approved. The Blind Low Vision Team increased by a .05 full time equivalent (FTE) employee, as more students arrive to the District with greater visual needs than in the past, many of whom require training and instruction in Braille. There has been an addition of a partially integrated General Learning Program (GLP) with some additional sections to explore opportunities for those students as they transition into the secondary education panel. Additional learning support will be extended to the Ottawa Carleton Virtual (OCV) campuses. The allocation of LST and Learning Resource Teachers (LRTs) will assist those students who have chosen to learn remotely. The next step in assessing the needs of the OCV students will consider Educational Assistant (EA) allocations.

6.2 Memo 21-030, Planning for District Special Education Support 2021-2022

Your committee had before it Memo 21-030, reviewing plans for District special education support for the 2021-2022 school year.

Superintendent Symmonds specified that a companion report is issued with the academic staffing plan to highlight the decisions arrived at with respect to special education in the District. Manager Kay noted that LSS engages in an annual process where the department studies current specialized program classes and makes adjustments based on projected student need. This year an added element of consideration arose with pandemic measures and the goals to secure stability for staff and students alike. Overall, there were few changes to the specialized program classes and she highlighted the following changes going into effect for September 2021:

- The itinerant teacher of ASD has worked closely with the classroom educational team. Through these inroads, positive results were observed on changing the trajectory for some students with autism. For the 2021-2022 school year, there will be added support for this work;
- Queen Elizabeth Public School will welcome a new ASD class;
- Queen Elizabeth Public School's intermediate developmental disability program has had low enrollment numbers for many years. It was deemed feasible to close the class this year, with the fewest impact to existing students; and
- Across the District, the primary special needs classes had low enrolment. Factoring geographic distribution of students and using information assessing the fewest impacts to existing classes, the decision was made to close the class at W.E. Gowling Public School.

In response to an inquiry from Ms. Miedema, Manager Kay noted systems were established, allowing the District to track which students and their families have made various choices for in-person or virtual mode of learning for the 2021-2022 school year. For those students accessing virtual plans for next year, LSS will ensure placement opportunities are available should the plans continue to be appropriate for September 2022. She noted that annually there are approximately 30% of students moving within Specialized Program Classes (SPCs), for example, junior to intermediate panels, intermediate to secondary panels, and graduation. She stated that as families accessing special education support wish to return to in-person learning, requests will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. In-person learning is often the preferable method of schooling, if students require the support offered by SPCs.

In response to an inquiry from Mr. Morris, Manager Kay stated that in the LDSIP program approximately one third of the students leaving the LDSIP will be transitioning into high school. All 40 students in the LDSIP will have had two years in the program. Mr. Morris questioned whether there had been requests from families to complete the program in the traditional sense, featuring three full years of training in LDSIP. Manager Kay responded that there are questions pertaining to longer stays in LDSIP and LSS works closely with educational teams to assess and accommodate the needs of the students. There is a reluctance to suggest a third year and this is not a learning strategy recommended by LSS. She explained that the intent of the LDSIP is to have a time limited, intensive program. The student then returns to the regular classroom with support. The experience has been that this leads to positive educational outcomes and pathway opportunities as students transition into high school. Mr. Morris maintained that equity of outcome is important for each student. He expressed the concern that due to the unusual times of learning within a pandemic, some of the students exiting LDSIP may have not received the full benefit of the program. Employing an itinerant teacher to visit local classrooms for support may not be as intensive as the experience students would have received in a normal school year. Manager Kay reflected that due to the fully self-contained, small group environment with the LDSIP teachers, the experience for students in the 2020-2021 school year was more intensive than in years past. The return to the regular class with the itinerant teacher will be able to recreate the goals associated with the integrated portion of the program. One of the other considerations is to create space in the program for the grade four and five students who have felt the impact of the pandemic in their learning. Mr. Morris concluded by imparting that extreme value is placed in the generalization phase for students learning in the regular classroom and he hopes that this can be replicated again in a challenging year ahead.

Ms. Houlden queried the rationale behind adding an elementary itinerant teacher when one third of students in the LDSIP program are transitioning from grade eight into grade nine. She saw a greater need in the placement of an added itinerant teacher to the secondary panel. Manager Kay stated that many of the LSCs have a Kindergarten to grade 12 portfolios. The LSC model supports education teams from elementary to secondary schools. Ms. Houlden asked whether the LSCs have experience with secondary students. System Principal Kessler shared that a designated LSC focuses on referrals and the transition planning process. LSS recommends that families moving into grade nine level explore a learning strategies course as an ideal way to support students as they graduate into high school. In addition, educator teams, in consultation with families, bring forward learning disability program referrals for students at the secondary level. Three high schools in the District offer learning disability programs. She noted that the pillars of the LDSIP program are self-advocacy, self awareness and use of technology. Some of the LDSIP students are moving into grade seven and LSS has identified some gaps for this particular age group, whereas there are many pillars of support already in place for the transition into high school.

7. Department Update

7.1 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Symmonds reported that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shift and disrupt the education system. The District remains closely connected with Ottawa Public Health (OPH) to follow municipal directions and safety guidelines.

There has been a change in the screening criteria from OPH. This direction has resulted in more absences for students and staff. Increased challenges have arisen to find occasional teachers for instruction. After making all reasonable efforts to find replacement staff, decisions to pivot to remote learning, with less than 24 hours of notice, have occurred to avoid cancelling the class. He emphasized that schools remain safe relative to viral transmission in the community; however the number of cases continues to grow on a daily basis. On 6 April 2021, Dr. Vera Etches, OPH Chief Medical Officer, presented information at the Committee of the Whole meeting, addressing questions from trustees as it related to measures to combat COVID-19 and the current outbreak trends in Ottawa.

Superintendent Symmonds identified that with the stay-at-home order announced today, the District continues to assess how to best deliver education within the safety of schools. He noted today Premier Doug Ford announced that education workers serving students with special needs will be eligible for vaccines next week. Though the District has no further

information on the vaccination prioritization, communication continues with OPH on the process for the vaccination rollout. Information will be shared with educational partners as it becomes available.

Superintendent Symmonds reported that in January 2021, a letter from the Ministry of Education arrived, outlining the forthcoming federal Safe Return to Class fund. To date the Transfer Payment Agreement (TPA) has yet to be received; however once this agreement is issued, a specific description will provide further clarification on instructions for use of the funds. He noted that mental health support does not strictly apply to all areas of special education however mental health support is part of the LSS portfolio.

Superintendent Symmonds shared the new funding allocations for the remainder of this school year. Approximately \$200,000 was allotted to support students with special education needs. Funding was used to help support continuing education programs in both credit and non-credit granting courses.. An additional \$175,000 was received to support students with special education needs for a summer transition program. The model that LSS will propose will not be exactly the same as the year previous. Last year the Ministry announcement came at the end of June and the LSS worked to establish a responsive model of services and supports. This year LSS has additional time to consider areas of support for students with high special education needs who may be challenged upon the return to school in September.

The Ministry of Education is providing in-year funding to continue to support the mental health of all students. In addition to \$195,000 to support the implementation of the new School Mental Health Ontario Action Kit, \$158,000 will be allocated for summer mental health support systems for students who are struggling with mental health concerns. In the summer of 2020, the program was called the “Continuity of Mental Health Supports”. Staff psychologists and social workers had the opportunity to support students over the summer, maintaining a connection and preparing students for the return to school. A portion of the \$158,000 will be used to provide training and resources for District mental health professionals.

New evidence-based reading intervention programs are being funded with \$124,000 from the Ministry. Programming is to be offered to struggling readers who are at risk due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For summer reading support, another \$180,000 funding envelope was granted.

Superintendent Symmonds indicated that LSS is in the process of examining the best strategies to develop the specially funded programs. The finalized plan will be presented to SEAC.

Trustee Boothby commented that all District staff have been working to capacity and beyond for over a year. She expressed the concern that an additional workload burden for the same employees throughout the summer may lead to "burnout". Superintendent Symmonds highlighted that the concern is an important consideration for LSS and senior staff. He noted that these summer opportunities are voluntary; however, LSS are making efforts to ensure all staff are exercising self-care practices to ensure that they return to school in September, rejuvenated and prepared for the new school year. Dr. Duschner showed appreciation for the identification of the high level of stress that staff are experiencing while supporting the mental health needs of students and families. She confirmed that LSS is exploring all options for staffing during the summer including possibly hiring outside the school board if volunteers do not step forward. When staff volunteers to work over the summer break, an initial conversation will occur to ensure that they are balancing their time and making self-care a priority.

Ms. Allen requested further information on the strategy to hire outside of the OCDSB. Her understanding is that recruiting mental health staff is challenging. She drew attention to the inequity should financial incentives be involved to hire other individuals at a compensation rate higher than existing staff at the District. Dr. Duschner stated that the notion of hiring outside of the OCDSB was an example of a strategy which may be deployed. She noted that she is unable to field a question about the earnings of the summer staff members; however if LSS was unable to fulfill these roles internally, other recruitment undertakings would be fulfilled through consultation with the Professional Student Services Personnel (PSSP) union executive.

Ms. Titley queried the number of summer staff required for the described programs. Manager Kay noted that in the summer of 2020, LSS was working with a substantially larger budget. Approximately 200 OCDSB staff, across four federation groups, were hired to work for two weeks in the summer break period. She affirmed that for the summer of 2021, a model of support will be created using a smaller staff group. The hiring is completed with colleagues in labour relations. Last year Memorandums of Agreement (MOA) were developed with all four federation partners.

- a. Update on the Committee of the Whole Motion of 16 April 2019 on Supporting Mental Health through an Equity Lens for Indigenous Students and Male Students of African Descent

Superintendent Symmonds reported that on 16 April 2019 the Board directed staff to evaluate, through an equity lens, barriers to access mental health services within the OCDSB, for students who self identify as Indigenous and for male students of African descent. Dr. Duschner explained that a plan was developed to proceed with

a literature review to examine the barriers and facilitators for accessing mental health for the distinct groups of students. Part of the plan was to engage with the students directly to explore the student experiences in the Ottawa area and at the District. Once the draft Mental Health Strategy was finalized in the fall of 2019, she held consultations with the District's advisory committees. Mental health staff connected with academic researchers at the University of Ottawa concerning two literature reviews: one for issues faced by Indigenous students and the other for issues that Black students encounter. The assembly of student focus groups occurred up until March 2020 when the project was paused due to the announcement of the provincial school closure. This was a decision that was made in consultation with the Indigenous Education and Equity Teams. Dr. Duschner shared that inviting people to confer on the topic of mental health and well-being is a sensitive effort. She underscored the importance of engaging students in a way that is safe for them from a psychological and cultural perspective.

Independent research on the part of District Mental Health Teams continued on the literature review component of the endeavour. To-date the work completed is listed as follows:

- June 2020 - Mental Health Team representative attended the Black Student Virtual Forum;
- August 2020 - Two scoping literature reviews were completed;
- Fall 2020 - Developed a framework and process for the consultations with student focus groups, including appropriate mental health supports for students;
- November 2020 - Indigenous-led facilitation for Indigenous student focus groups. Emotional support was provided by an Elder from the community; and
- March 2020 - Black students invited to share their voices by joining a virtual discussion. Five focus groups were held and each group was supported by social workers and psychology staff, along with co-facilitation by students from the Black Student Forum.

Dr. Duschner reported that the data is being reviewed and summarized into themes. The information will be shared with the students to ensure that the themes are an accurate reflection of the messages that they intended to convey. Following the consultation with students, a report will be written and shared with the advisory committees.

Chair Nadon-Campbell queried whether there were students present in the discussions who identified as accessing special education support. Dr. Duschner responded that they did not specifically solicit the voices of those students accessing special education support; however, such students may have been in the various groups.

8. Committee Reports

8.1 Board

There was no report from the Board.

8.2 Committee of the Whole

Chair-Nadon Campbell shared that the presentation provided by Dr. Vera Etches at the Committee of the Whole (COW) meeting of 6 April 2021 impressed her. She recommended listening to the recorded video found on the District website's calendar event page. She expressed enthusiasm that the teachers, who are working with students accessing special education needs, will be given preference to receive COVID-19 vaccinations. Ms. Titley commended that many individuals from the federations present at SEAC wrote to the Ministry, promoting legislation to allow those workers to receive priority vaccinations. Chair Nadon-Campbell thanked those who had written letters to the government and noted that their hard work has prevailed.

8.3 Indigenous Education Advisory Council

There was no report for the Indigenous Education Advisory Council.

8.4 Parent Involvement Committee

Mr. Morris highlighted that during the Parent Involvement Committee (PIC) meeting of 31 March 2021, staff made a presentation on Barriers to Engagement, which included a literature review. He suggested that a discussion of common barriers faced when navigating the school system might be an exercise that SEAC could pursue at a later date. He reported that parents noted the lack of a roadmap when entering the system with a child who requires special education support. Newcomers to Canada may face compounded issues associated with settling in a new country and the challenge of finding support for their child may be an area that becomes too overwhelming to manage. One member of PIC queried the possibility of connecting with SEAC to deliberate on better ways to serve parents.

9. New Business

Superintendent Symmonds reported that April is World Autism Awareness Month. He acknowledged the work of the LSS Autism Team and the District, specifically the outstanding leadership of System Principal Kessler and Applied

Behaviour Analysis (ABA) Coordinator, Leanne Forrest. He announced that Dr. Jed Baker will appear as a keynote speaker on 8 April 2021 from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m. The presentation will include a discussion of strategies to motivate individuals to learn ways to teach social skills and generalize skills. Information and registration details are available on the District's website. The presentation slides are available to download. In addition, he noted that on 22 April 2021, a Zoom panel discussion will be held with representatives from Autism Ontario, Service Coordination Support and Developmental Services Ontario. These organizations will be sharing information on supporting families and navigating services and supports locally. Discussions will be based around children and youth case management and developmental services. Registration is available through the District website. The sessions can be accessed through YouTube streaming should registration be full.

9.1 Proposed Committee Meeting Schedule for School Year 2021-2022

The SEAC meeting schedule for school year 2021-2022 was presented and adopted by consensus.

10. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:44 p.m.

Sonia Nadon-Campbell, Chair,
Special Education Advisory
Committee