



Report No. 23-010

Specialized Program Class Referral Information 2022-2023

Key Contact: Peter Symmonds, Superintendent of Learning Support Services, 613-596-8254
Stacey Kay, Manager, Learning Support Services, 613-596-8257

PURPOSE:

1. This report provides information regarding the specialized program class (SPC) referral and placement process for the 2022-2023 school year and represents an important source of data to inform planning and decision making regarding supports and services for students with complex special needs.

STRATEGIC LINKS:

2. The presented information directly contributes to the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) Strategic Plan goals of creating a Culture of Caring and Social Responsibility. Learning Support Services (LSS) staff will use this information to improve equity of access, opportunity, and outcomes for learners with special education needs. In addition, this information will support informed and responsible resource allocation with respect to SPCs and the OCDSB special education service delivery model.

CONTEXT:

3. LSS collects and analyzes data regarding the SPC referral and placement process to inform academic staffing and budget decisions. Reviewing resourcing and program delivery is part of our ongoing effort to improve equity of access, opportunity and outcome for students. To support the Board in its broader learning about special education program delivery, this report includes additional contextual information.

The vast majority of OCDSB students with special education needs are served through inclusive programming at their community school in the regular classroom environment. The District offers a continuum of placement options including SPCs. The number and type of SPCs has a direct impact on resources available to support students with special education needs in other types of placements including the regular class (e.g., Educational Assistant (EA) and special education teacher support).

SPCs can be very beneficial opportunities for enhancing student learning and well-being. However, there are operational, pedagogical, and resourcing considerations which have long been the focus of discussion. More recently, as we work through the lens of human rights, equity and inclusion, we have started to consider whether and how SPCs might create systemic barriers for some groups of students. This is an important element to future discussions about special education programming and delivery models which warrants additional consideration.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

4. Special Education Delivery

In Ontario, the delivery of special education programs and services is guided by [Learning for All](#) which is “built on the principles and guidelines associated with three instructional approaches:

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL);
- Differentiated Instruction (DI); and
- the tiered approach to prevention and intervention.

Across the province there is significant variability in the delivery of special education supports and services despite each district being governed by the Education Act, guided by foundational documents including Learning for All and being allocated the same proportional funding to support students with special education needs. The OCDSB has traditionally allocated more proportional resources to SPCs than to models adopted by other districts that support students with complex special needs in a regular class placement.

At the OCDSB, the Board Policy P.096.SES Special Education Programs and Services outlines *Key Learning Supports* and states that the special education policy shall be achieved through the delivery of a variety of learning supports. This includes a continuum of placement options based on the five Ministry defined categories of placement ranging from regular class with indirect support to full-time special education class.

5. OCDSB Specialized Program Class Offerings

The OCDSB currently offers SPCs which are either partially integrated or fully self-contained placement options for students requiring this level of support.

At elementary, there are 11 types of SPCs that support students with specific exceptionalities and/or learning profiles. A total of 146 elementary SPCs are currently offered and are distributed across 66 school sites.

At secondary, there are 10 types of SPCs that support students with specific exceptionality and/or learning profiles. Approximately 83 secondary SPCs are offered and these are distributed across 23 school sites.

In total, approximately 2000 students are currently placed in specialized program classes through the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) process.

6. Resourcing Specialized Program Classes

The Education Act sets teacher-student ratios for special education classes (e.g., fully self-contained and partially integrated classes) and the IPRC process. There are no regulatory obligations setting ratios or proportions of professional support staff (e.g., psychologists, social workers, speech-language pathologists) or paraprofessional support (e.g., EAs). Additionally, the Education Act does not direct the proportion of placement types offered by a district school board; therefore the number and type of SPCs is a district level decision.

The number and type of SPCs has a direct impact on resources available to support students with special education needs in other types of placements including the regular class (e.g., EA and special education teacher support). The existing SPC model also has a significant impact on the use of professional student support services (e.g., psychology and speech-language pathology) as it leads to prioritizing professional assessment to support placement decisions rather than to guide programming and intervention support in the regular class.

7. SPC Referral Information

Table 1 and Table 2 presented as Appendix A and B provide a summary of SPC referral information available for the 2022-2023 school year for elementary and secondary panels respectively. The data collected annually for each type of SPC includes:

- the total pupil capacity;
- the number of referrals (ie., applications) received in the spring referral review process;
- the number of placement recommendations offered by the review committee;
- referrals passed to another committee for review;
- number of students placed in a particular SPC through the IPRC process (e.g., this includes new and returning students to a particular SPC); and
- the number of students waiting for a particular type of SPC.

In any given school year, SPC referrals received after March generally inform placement recommendations for the following school year. While referrals are reviewed throughout the school year, operationally, this represents a much smaller number than those reviewed each spring.

The data provided in this report reflects information available to LSS as of 30 October 2022 (i.e., 'snapshot' data). It is important to note that the exact numbers fluctuate over the course of the school year as new referrals are received and as students enter and exit SPCs.

For the 2022-2023 school year, 564 referrals for SPCs were reviewed by referral review committees as part of the spring process in order to provide recommendations. Overall referral trends have remained remarkably consistent over the past 5 years.

8. Specialized Program Class Waitlist

Overall, waitlists for SPCs are well managed. This has been achieved through an intensive annual planning process that sees the opening and closing of SPCs to meet anticipated needs. Waitlists for placement in Autism Spectrum Disorder

(ASD) SPCs are the exception and continue to be high despite the aforementioned approach.

For the 2022-2023 school year, one secondary Developmental Disabilities (DD) and three secondary ASD SPCs were opened to support anticipated student needs and minimize waitlists (as previously reported in Report 22-022, *Academic Staffing Report for 2022-2023* and Memorandum No. 22-020, *Planning for District Special Education Support 2022-2023*).

Rather than recommend additional SPCs to address all areas of projected need, LSS pursued alternative strategies for student support to better align with inclusive education practices. These strategies continue to be explored and adopted. As such, itinerant teachers to support elementary students waiting for ASD/DD SPCs were increased from 2 to 3 positions and the itinerant teacher position supporting students with Learning Disabilities (LD) in the regular class was maintained.

9. Geographic Distribution Analysis

Policy P.096.SES Special Education Programs and Services also outlines the equitable application of the specialized class location model whereby the distribution of SPCs endeavors to provide access to this placement type across the District's five geographic zones (e.g., Far East, East, West, Far West and South zones). To this end, the annual analysis and planning process considers the geographic distribution of students waiting for a specific SPC type.

Table 3, presented as Appendix C, shows the breakdown of the geographic location of students on the waitlist for elementary ASD. This is the only SPC with a waitlist greater than 10, as of 30 October 2022. Analysis of this geographic distribution is proportional to student population across the District and indicates that student need and the availability of current ASD SPCs are equitably distributed across the District.

Where the waitlist has fewer than 10 students (elementary DD, Junior Language Learning Disability (LLD) Program, Learning Disabilities Specialized Intervention Program (LD SIP), secondary Behaviour Intervention Program (BIP), Storefront and ASD Secondary Credit Support Program (ASDSCSP)), staff has analyzed the waitlist data with respect to distribution across the geographic zones, and no significant geographic patterns were identified.

10. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Program Class Considerations

The need for intensive support for students with ASD in SPCs and in regular program classes continues to be high. The recently released report from the Public Health Agency of Canada, [*Autism Spectrum Disorder: Highlights from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth*](#) indicates that 1 in 50 (or 2.0%) Canadian children and youth aged 1 to 17 years are diagnosed with ASD. This is a significant increase from previously reported incidence rates of 1 in 66. These statistics are consistent with the experience of the District as we continue to welcome increasing numbers of students with ASD and those with complex profiles.

The OCDSB has increased the number of ASD SPCs annually over the past 10 years, however, there continues to be a significant waitlist for students that meet

criteria for this level of support. The legislated student/teacher ratio for ASD special education classes is 1:6 - one teacher for six students. In addition, the District practice is to allocate two Education Assistants per ASD SPC. This results in an annual staffing cost of approximately \$250,000 per class. Additional transportation costs are also incurred.

The District currently operates 36 elementary and 20 secondary ASD classes. Under the current model most students that are placed in elementary ASD class transition to a secondary ASD specialized program class. As a result, every new elementary ASD class necessitates the opening of an additional secondary ASD class. It is anticipated that another three secondary ASD SPCs will be required to accommodate grade 8 students currently enrolled in elementary ASD classes and transitioning to secondary for September 2023. There are not currently sufficient secondary ASD classes to accommodate the placement of these students.

11. Professional Assessments

Appendix D (Table 4) outlines the professional assessment waitlist data which was collected in June 2022. The data reflects students waiting for assessment at the end of the 2021-2022 school year. School closures related to the pandemic and continued challenges staffing the professional support services disciplines (e.g., psychology and speech-language pathology) have impacted the District's ability to complete formal assessments. It should be noted that these trends are similar across the province and have also impacted professional services available through the health care sector and through private providers.

Students waiting for formal standardized assessment are supported through multi-disciplinary team consultation and the provision of strategies and programming recommendations to educators, as appropriate.

Priorities and Partnership Funding (PPF) for the purpose of conducting professional assessment was provided to district school boards in an effort to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for students with special needs. Using this funding, 80 psychoeducational and 60 speech-language pathology assessments were completed outside of the regular school day between May and December 2022.

LSS continues its work to implement the Clinical Services module of the IEP Online (IOL) special education technology platform. It has been a highly complex and labour intensive process to develop this technology solution given the complexity of special education supports and services and the confidentiality requirements for this type of student information. Progress continues but the pandemic and implementation of a new student information system (i.e., Aspen) have impacted implementation timelines. Upon implementation, the Clinical Services module should afford the District with improved data with respect to professional support services including wait times.

12. Operational Considerations

Support models for students with complex needs merit careful consideration and have interconnected impacts related to equity, school accommodation planning, staffing and financial resource allocation. LSS continues to work cross

departmentally with Finance, Planning and People, Culture and Leadership to address the following complex issues including:

- disproportionate numbers of SPCs in schools with high needs and space restrictions in specific areas of the District requiring new classes;
- staff recruitment and retention challenges for SPCs; and
- special education spending that exceeds funding by approximately 12%.

13. Understanding the Impact of Specialized Program Classes

Increasingly it is understood that there are both potential benefits and risks inherent in the SPC service delivery model as it is currently designed in the OCDSB. Low ratio classes can provide enhanced staffing resources and facilitate precision in effective instructional practices for learners with complex needs. They can however, separate a student from their home community, significantly increase transportation time to school, increase school transitions, provide a more restricted range of peers and higher ratio of students presenting with complex needs.

Working with school teams, LSS promotes practices to ensure that parents/caregivers understand potential impacts for their child or youth associated with a transition to a SPC. Specifically, parents/caregivers need to be provided with information regarding potential impacts for future credit attainment and pathway planning. For example, many students placed in SPCs are accessing a modified or alternate programming which has significant implications to the pathway outcomes at graduation for a student.

The OCDSB is gaining a deeper understanding of elements of identity, intersectionality, positionality and the systemic racism and barriers that exist within the District. Incorporating an anti-racism, anti-oppressive approach is an expectation at all levels of the organization. Ongoing professional learning is occurring to assist staff in identifying, disrupting and dismantling barriers to students that disproportionately impact some students more than others.

Intensive work is underway to address the structures and processes that exist in the OCDSB that have continually underserved some students. As such, LSS continues the work to better understand outcomes for students in SPCs. More work is also required to better understand the intersectionality of identity-based data, pathway analysis and destreaming for students in SPCs. Additionally, academic literature and deepening understanding of equity and human rights continue to inform recommendations moving forward.

14. Next Steps

LSS is working collaboratively with several other central departments (e.g., Program and Learning (PAL), Research Evaluation Analytics Division (READ), Equity etc.) to continue to learn and gather information to guide planning and decision making regarding special education service delivery options that best support student achievement and well-being and fulfill our responsibilities under the Ontario Human Rights Code and OCDSB Human Rights Policy P.147.GOV. In the coming months, additional information will be available to the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) and the Board of Trustees through department update presentations, memorandum and reports including:

- Supporting Students with Disabilities application-based Ministry funding
 - elementary/secondary General Learning Program support;
- preliminary identity-disability intersectionality analysis for OCDSB students with special education needs; and
- programming for students with complex developmental profiles at Crystal Bay Centre for Special Education and Clifford Bowey Public School.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

15. SPCs represent a significant year over year cost to the District and impact the resources available to support more inclusive education practices. Special education spending in the OCDSB continues to exceed special education funding provided by the province. LSS continues to analyze the ongoing impact of consistently adding additional SPCs (e.g., adding specific types of elementary SPCs leads to that model of support at secondary).

Data collection for this report was completed with existing LSS human resources. Using current methods, approximately 50 hours of central staff time are required to complete this annual analysis. In addition, school based special education staff (e.g., Learning Support Teachers) are required to contribute to the data collection required to produce this report.

COMMUNICATION/CONSULTATION ISSUES:

16. The information in this report will be reviewed with the OCDSB SEAC.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

17. The following questions are provided to support the discussion of this item by the Committee:
- Based on the information provided, are there considerations for the SPC referral process for the 2023-2024 school year?
 - Does the data collected and presented in this annual report continue to serve the committee?
 - How does the OCDSB model for special education align with current approaches for inclusive education, human rights and equity?

Peter Symmonds, Superintendent of Learning Support Services

Michele Giroux
Director of Education and Secretary of the Board

APPENDICES

Appendix A - 2022-2023 Elementary Specialized Program Class Referrals
 Appendix B - 2022-2023 Secondary Specialized Program Class Referrals
 Appendix C - 2022-2023 Elementary ASD Specialized Program Class Waitlist
 Appendix D - 2021-2022 Professional Assessment Waitlist Data