INTERNAL AUDIT TEAM
Ontario East

22-23 EA Deployment Engagement -Part 1Process- Final Report

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board

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Audit Committee Members
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Executive Summary

Educational Assistants ("EA") are a key resource to the Board and to schools to help support students with high needs. Central Board staff allocate EAs to each school based on medical, safety and behavioral needs of students. The Regional Internal Audit Team ("RIAT") performed a consulting engagement for Ottawa-Carleton District School Board ("OCDSB") from March to December 2022. Management requested this engagement and the Audit Committee approved it on October 21, 2021 as part of the 2021-22 Internal Audit Plan. Per management's request the engagement was postponed to the 2022-2023 school year. The EA Allocation Engagement aligns with OCDSB's Strategic Risk Assessment that identifies the risk for student health, wellbeing and safety.

The Ministry of Education provides Special Education funding to all School Boards. Each School Board then establishes their own EA support model taking into consideration the increasing number of high needs students. At OCDSB, EAs are allocated to schools and the Principal is responsible to allocate the resources where needed. There may be instances where one-to-one support is provided. At other SBs in the Ontario East Region, EA support ranges from full time individual, full-time shared, part-time individual to part-time shared.

The objectives of the engagement were to conduct a review of:

- The EA allocation and reallocation processes (respectively in spring and fall); and
- The set criteria used for the EA allocation.

Our methodology included, but was not limited to:

- Discussions with central board staff;
- Observing the EA allocation and reallocation processes;
- Reviewing relevant documentation, including the set criteria used for the EA allocation; and
- Benchmarking other school boards;

Overall, the EA allocation process at OCDSB is effective, utilizing a collaborative approach amongst highly specialized staff to provide each school with EA resources, allowing for budget limitations. Similar to other school boards the funding provided does not adequately cover all the needs.

The EA allocation process is not currently automated. Data on students' needs is provided by each school through a standard EA Allocation Request Form ("ARF"). Currently there is no set of detailed consistent criteria on which to evaluate students' needs. Data collected is used by the two System Principals to inform the EA allocation per school. A Google Sheet listing each school and corresponding EA resource allocation is prepared. This process is not efficient and is inherently subject to human error. Furthermore, it is also not transparent should the rational be provided to a third party or explained to the principals.

OCDSB has an average of 91.20 students per Educational Assistant ("EA"). Compared to:

- similar sized Board's in Ontario (Section B – Graph #1), OCDSB was slightly above the average for similar sized Boards in Ontario, with two Boards reporting a higher ratio;

- other school boards in the Ottawa area (Section B – Graph #2), OCDSB is above average with one Board reporting a higher ratio; the Ontario East Region (Section B – Graph #3), OCDSB has a significantly higher ratio than the other eight Boards.

The Detailed Report section contains insight into observations, and a proposed road map to improve the current processes. It brings forward opportunities for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the EA allocation process. These are informed, among other things, by:

- The Regional Internal Audit Team's experience and general knowledge of Special Education;

- Special Education engagements previously conducted at other School Boards ('SBs') in the Ontario East region; and

- Discussions with other Regional Internal Audit Teams in Ontario that have conducted similar work.

The main area for improvement centers on the objectivity of the high needs student classification, to ensure that the allocation is fair, equitable and consistent across the system. This would also allow for objective data collection that would clearly establish the gap between the funding received and the needs in the classroom.

- Student needs identification and classification is the driver for the EA allocation process. Management has identified this and is working towards a more objective rubric; and

- Management is looking at ways to automate the EA allocation process that would include documentation retention, a formal school-based review and approval process and a set algorithm for the allocation.

We would like to thank the staff of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board for their assistance during this engagement.

Standards

This engagement was also conducted in conformance with the International Standards for Professional Practice of Internal Auditing.

Limitation on Use of Internal Audit Report

This report is intended primarily for the information and use of the individuals on the distribution list on the cover page of this report and should not be provided to any other individual without the consent of the Regional Internal Audit Manager, Ontario East Region.

Detailed report

A. EA Allocation Process
Observation:

Background

The Board is divided into six regions or family of schools, South, West, South East, Kanata, Central and East, which are the responsibility of six Superintendents. There is a team of six LSCs[1] assigned to the 113 elementary schools within the district. There is a team of four LSCs assigned to the 33 secondary schools within the district.

Leading Practices

#1 – The process is consistent year over year

The Board employs a consistent approach to EA Allocation from year to year.

- In late March Learning Support Services ("LSS") sends out a memorandum, which provides guidance on completing the EA Allocation Request form ("ARF"), to all Principals and Vice Principals.

- The ARFs are completed by each school's Learning Support Teacher ("LST") along with assistance from their assigned LSCs, then reviewed and approved by the Principals and forwarded electronically to LSS by late April. The information from the ARF's is used by the two System Principals to inform the EA allocation amount for each school. A Google Sheet is prepared listing all schools and their EA allocation (i.e. specialized class, general population and student specific). Once complete this spreadsheet is discussed with Superintendents and brought to Director's Executive Council for approval.

#2 – A collaborative approach

The Board employs a collaborative approach to the allocation of EAs. The forms are initially completed by the school's LST after consultation with the school team. After the forms are filed with LSS, the students' needs are reviewed and discussed in detail by the two System Principals. Subsequently the System Principals meet with each LSC to discuss student needs and the EA allocation. We observed three such meetings out of a total of 10, two for the elementary panel and one from the secondary panel. The meetings were effective and efficient with wholesome discussions on student needs and corresponding EA assistance required. There were some differences between the LSCs and System Principals initial assessments of student needs which were discussed and eventually agreed upon.

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[1] Learning Support Consultants

A. EA Allocation Process

#3 – Consistent process throughout Eastern Ontario

After the allocation process, the System Principals review the results with each of the six Superintendents after which they are brought forward to Director's Executive Council for approval. This process is consistent with other School Boards throughout Eastern Ontario.

Opportunities for Improvement

#1 – A more objective process

The process in place requires the LSTs to include on the ARF those students that have a safety or medical concern. In determining the required EA allocation, students with safety concerns are viewed on an aggregate basis, with emphasis placed on having sufficient resources available during transition periods. Students with medical concerns are considered on an individual basis determining what is required for their support. The prioritizing of students' needs starts at the school level and is fine-tuned during the consultation phase between the LSCs and the System Principals. This process is subjective and can be influenced by how well the LSCs can advocate for the schools' needs. There is not a clear correlation between the student needs and the final EA Allocation.

The March memo sent to the Principals and Vice Principals provides some examples of safety and medical needs. The Board would benefit from providing a more expansive list of needs to guide the schools in their student needs classification. Management indicated that System Principals are considering developing a more complete and detailed list of medical needs, with a tiered EA allocation such as .25, .50 and .75 depending on the severity of the student's needs. For example, a student with medical needs, such as Osteoporosis, would require more attention throughout the day, thus a higher full time equivalent ("FTE") EA allocation. This would be a positive step forward in helping to make the process more understandable and objective.

#2 – Automation of the process

Currently the EA allocation process is manual, starting with the information input on the ARFs up to the preparation of the final EA Allocation excel spreadsheet. This process could be subject to error due to its inherent nature. Access to the final EA allocation excel spreadsheet is restricted to the System Principals, however there is no formal review procedure in place to ensure that the data is not corrupted. Senior Management recently attended a presentation on EA Allocation software, given by Optimus SBR, an Information Technology firm that has developed a web-based program to assist school boards with their EA Allocation process. The benefits of the software include:

- Providing a set of consistent board-wide criteria to evaluate the student needs;
- Provide a methodical and transparent approach to EA Allocation;
- Allow for a system of review and approval throughout the process.

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A. EA Allocation Process

Recommendation:

The Board considerS automating the EA allocation process. This would allow for a more objective, fair and transparent approach by providing consistent parameters to assess student's needs.

Management Action Plan:

Phase 1: Consider Options for Automation- Fall 2023
- Meet with Optimus SBR regarding software options to automate EA allocation- May 2023
- Form a working group to develop a rubric that schools will use to indicate a level of need for each student on their request form; present/test with LSCs, LSTs, Ps - September - November 2023
- Meet with OCDSB Business and Learning Technologies (B&LT) Department to discuss options to automate within the google suite- September/October 2023

Phase 2: Implementation of Rubric Phase- Winter 2023 to Spring 2025
- Consider best option for automation- Winter 2023
  - With Optimus SBR
    - Consider timelines/price in comparison with OCDSB B&LT
  - With OCDSB-
    - Create google form using the rubric that will reflect the current EA allocation chart that schools complete; test template
    - Merge info into a spreadsheet that will generate a base number of EA allocation/site
    - Merge this data into a spreadsheet that is similar to the current district spreadsheet representation of allocation across the district
- Revise allocation process (consider adding a multi-disciplinary team meeting for accountability that the allocation rubric is representative of the students)
- Implement the use of rubric- Spring, 2024
  - Review of the rubric/application to the process

Phase3: Implementation of Automation of EA allocation process- Fall 2024-Spring 2025
- Rollout trials with select school teams in the fall to refine the process- September-November 2024
- Gather feedback- December 2024-February 2025;
- Prepare for full implementation for the Spring EA allocation process- April 2025

Process Owner: System Principals of Learning Support Services reporting to the Superintendent of Learning Support Services

Full Implementation Date: Spring allocation process (Spring 2025)

A. EA Allocation Process

#3 – Discussions with Learning Support Consultants

We interviewed three LSCs to gather information on their role in the EA allocation process. There were two concerns that came out of these discussions:

1. The board did not have a detailed guideline to assist the LSCs in prioritizing students' needs; and
2. Challenges were faced in the students' transition phase from grade six to grade seven and from grade 8 to grade nine. LSCs felt that sharing of information on students at risk between the Elementary, Intermediate and Secondary panels was not consistent.

To point #1 the automation of the EA allocation process should address this concern. To point #2 the board should emphasize the need to share all information between the panels to ensure a seamless transition for the students. Automation of the process would ensure consistency in the information available to both panels.

#4 – Update Job Description for Educational Assistant

The job description for Educational Assistant was last updated May 15th, 2000. The Board should review and up-date this job description, where required, to reflect current demands of the job.

B. Comparison of Student to EA Support

Observation:

RIAT provides a comparison of student to EA support among School Boards in Ontario when performing these engagements. RIAT utilized the available 2021-22 Education Financial Information System (EFIS) data. Although this analysis serves as a starting point for future discussions, many important factors could influence these ratios. Some of these factors are:

- Board reputation supporting high needs students (better reputation leads to more students and increased demand in services);

- Student needs and corresponding resources to address those needs (more complex needs require more resources);

- Approach to identifying high needs students, addressing their exceptionalities and providing support;

- Integrated versus segregated classrooms and schools;

- Proximity to children's hospitals and other special need services/professionals;

- Proportion of student population with high needs and exceptionalities;

- Working conditions at each of these Boards (whether or not they believe they have sufficient EAs to support their students);

B. Comparison of Student to EA Support

- Inclusion or exclusion of EAs working in system and Life Skills Developmental Centres; and

- Utilization of EAs at the school level.

The Ministry of Education does not dictate a standardized service delivery model. The EA service delivery model at OCDSB is generally a shared model for students with high needs but may included some individualized (1 to 1) support. Other School Boards' service delivery models consists of shared and individualized (1 to 1) support for high need students.

OCDSB has on average 91.20 (2021-22) students per EA, representing:

- The average for similar size School Boards (see Graph #1);

- Second to the French Public School Board in Ottawa (See Graph #2); and

- The highest in Ontario-East (See Graph #3).

From the review of the graphs only, one could assume that the ratio is representative of the size of the Board more so than its geographical location.

For information, the Ontario-wide average sits at 75.19 and for the GTA School Boards (Toronto, Toronto Catholic, York, York Catholic, Peel and Dufferin-Peel) at 92.99 ADE per FTE.
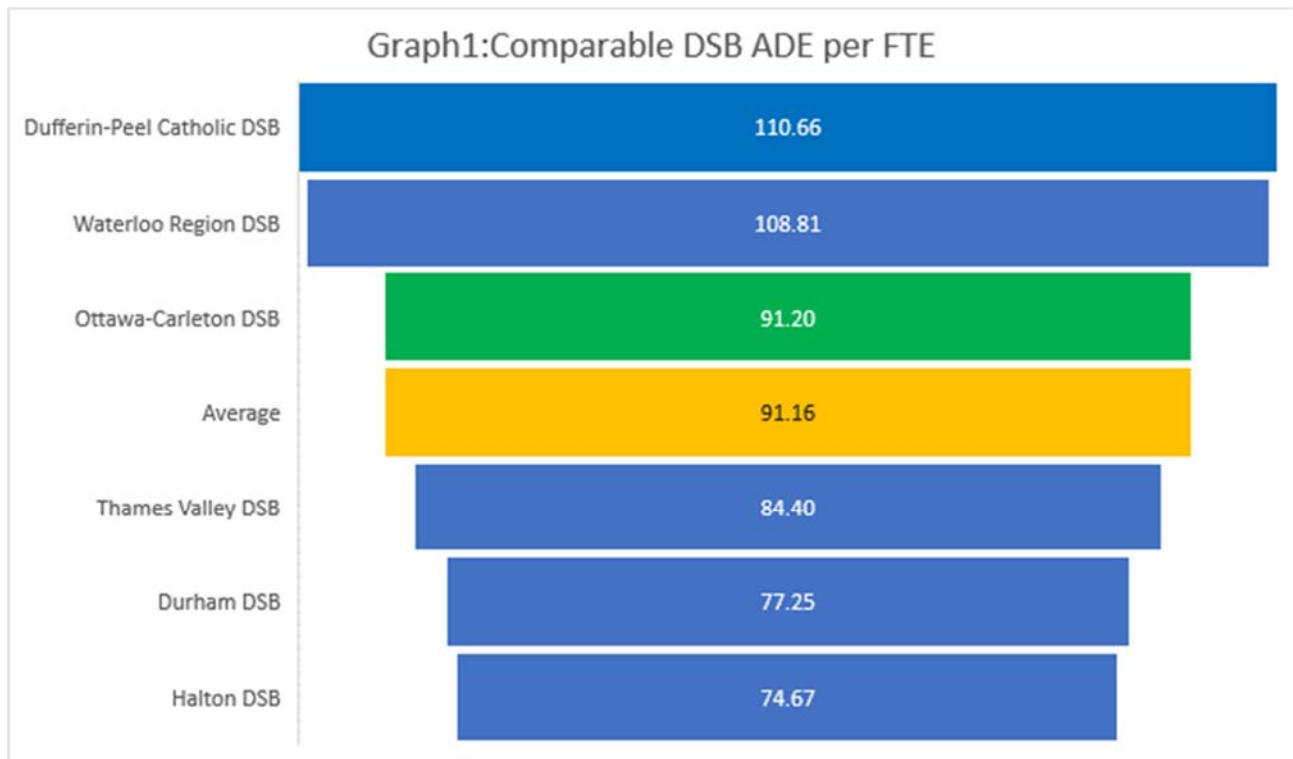
This seems to indicate that the OCDSB service level is in alignment with the GTA School Boards, where their ratio is way above the other School Boards in Ontario-East.

The following pages present Graphs #1 to #3 along with a description.

B. Comparison of Student to EA Support

1. For 6 SBs (5 English Public and 1 English Catholic) in Ontario with an average daily enrolment ("ADE") between 64,000 and 80,200 students, the average number of students per EA was 91.16. OCDSB, with 91.20 ADE per FTE, is at this average for school boards of similar size.

Graph1:Comparable DSB ADE per FTE

Dufferin-Peel Catholic DSB	110.66
Waterloo Region DSB	108.81
Ottawa-Carleton DSB	91.20
Average	91.16
Thames Valley DSB	84.40
Durham DSB	77.25
Halton DSB	74.67

B. Comparison of Student to EA Support

2. For the four school boards in Ottawa (two English, two French) with ADE between 16,000 and 73,000, OCDSB is above the average and second to the French Public School Board.

Graph 2: Ottawa ADE per FTE

School Board	ADE per FTE
CEP de l'Est de l'Ontario	97.28
Ottawa-Carleton DSB	91.20
Average	84.34
CSD cath. Centre-Est de l'Ont.	78.01
Ottawa Catholic DSB	70.88
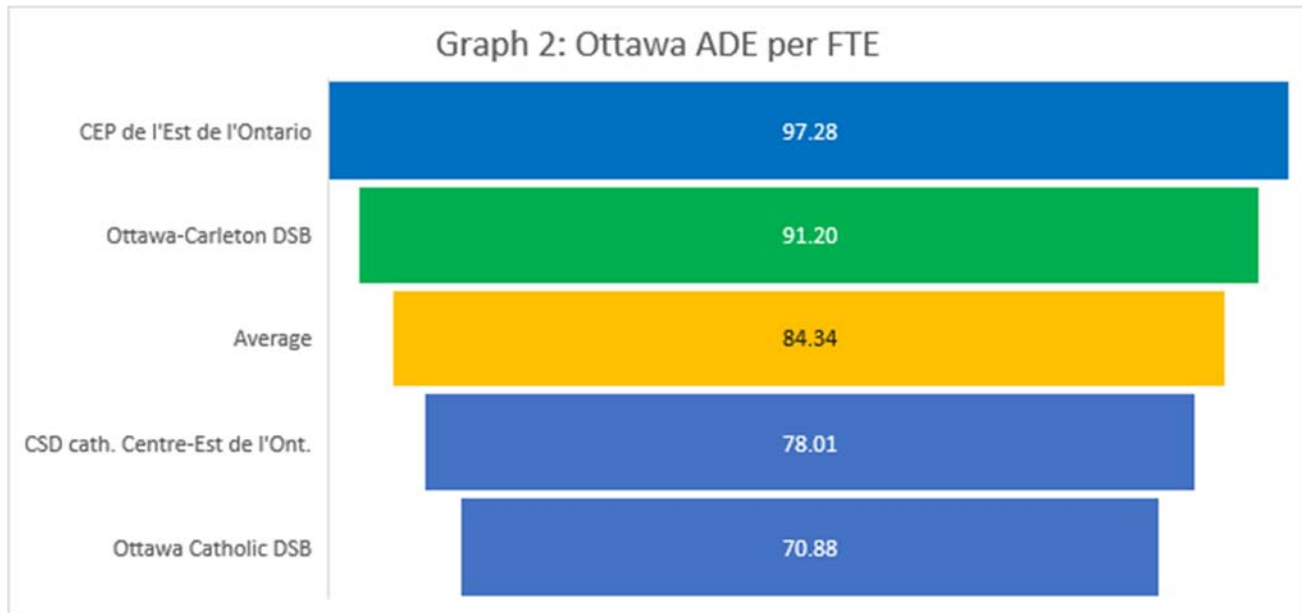
B. Comparison of Student to EA Support

3. For the nine Boards in the Ontario East Region (all English speaking: 5 Public, 4 Catholic) with ADE varying between 4,742 and 73,367 students, the average number of students per EA was 61.96. OCDSB has more students per EA on average than its counterparts in the region.

Graph 3: Ontario East ADE per FTE

Board	ADE per FTE
Ottawa-Carleton DSB	91.20
Limestone DSB	72.36
Ottawa Catholic DSB	70.88
Cath DSB of Eastern Ontario	67.75
Average	61.96
Upper Canada DSB	57.91
Hastings & Prince Edward DSB	54.57
Algonquin & Lakeshore Cath DSB	49.97
Renfrew County DSB	49.25
Renfrew County Catholic DSB	43.71