



SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

Wednesday, April 2, 2025, 7:00 pm
Trustees' Committee Room
133 Greenbank Road
Ottawa, Ontario

Members: Cathy Miedema (Association for Bright Children), Susan Cowin (Community Representative), Allison Bunney (Community Representative), Sonja Elliott (Autism Ontario), Lori-Ann Bradley (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder/Ontario Network Expertise (FASD/ONE), Jess Whitley (Inclusion Action in Ontario), Mike Marta (Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton), Anthony Wong (Ottawa Carleton Assembly of School Councils), Lindsay Copland (VOICE for Children Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing), Donna Dickson (Trustee), Nili Kaplan-Myrth (Trustee), Lynn Scott (Trustee)

Association Representatives (Non Voting): Catherine Houlden (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation), Melcha Wolanski (Ottawa-Carleton Elementary Teachers' Federation)

Staff and Guests: Cathryne Milburn (Trustee), Suzanne Nash (Trustee), Kate Stoudt (Superintendent, Learning Support Services), Kevin Gardner (General Manager, Financial Services), Justin Shulman (Principal, Learning Support Services), Emily Balla (General Manager, Mental Health Services), Deborah Lyon (System Principal, Learning Support Services), Claire Reynolds (Program Evaluation Officer, Learning Support Services), Gaylene McCutcheon (Psychologist, Learning Support Services), Tamara Persaud (Committee Coordinator, Governance Services)

1. Call to Order

Chair Miedema called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m.

2. Acknowledgement of Territorial Lands

Chair Miedema acknowledged that this meeting is taking place on unceded Algonquin Homelands and thanked the Algonquin Nations for their stewardship of these lands since time immemorial.

3. Approval of the Agenda

Moved by Trustee Kaplan-Myrth,

THAT the agenda be approved.

Carried

4. Delegations

4.1 Grace Clarke, re Students with Complex Special Learning Needs

Grace Clarke voiced concern regarding potential changes to special education and educational assistant (EA) allocation. She highlighted current inequities in education regarding access to support for students with complex learning and medical needs, and the limiting nature of insufficient staffing. She noted the difficult working conditions that EAs face and further difficulties that may arise should education support roles be reduced for both staff and students with special education needs. She encouraged the committee to reject the proposed specialized program class closures and requested an increase in support for students with complex learning and medical needs.

4.2 Cathy Varrette, re Impacts of Class Closures on Special Needs Students

Cathy Varrette discussed the importance of maintaining safe spaces in schools for students with special needs amidst possible reductions to specialized program classrooms (SPC) and alternative classrooms. She noted the importance of programming, activities and classrooms dedicated to students with needs similar to their own, specifically for students on the autism spectrum as the sense of inclusion and belonging should remain a priority for the board. She also highlighted the irregular school attendance for special needs students compared to mainstream students due to lack of EA support as many require additional support to attend classes.

4.3 Jodi Browne, re Proposed Special Program Classes Reductions

Jodi Browne shared her concerns on the impact of the potential closing of 39 alternative and specialized program classes on students with special needs. She highlighted that currently there is insufficient support for students with special needs in mainstream classrooms and that currently under-resourced classes will experience further hardships. She noted the importance of the specialized program classes, specifically the primary special needs program and general learning programs. Furthermore, she brought attention to the importance of daily meaningful peer interactions for all students but specifically for those with special needs and the potential negative impact if these connections are lost.

5. Review of Special Education Advisory Committee Report

5.1 5 March 2025, SEAC Report

Moved by Trustee Dickson,

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee report, dated 5 March 2025, be received.

Carried

Ottawa-Carleton Assembly of School Council representative, Anthony Wong, requested that section 9 of the minutes be corrected to read "Members expressed the need to add the potential changes to alternative and specialized program classes (SPC), as a discussion item to the 2 April 2025 meeting agenda as concern was raised about 39 alternative and SPCs are being phased out through the EPR process. SEAC may present their view of these changes to stakeholders and trustees at the Committee of the Whole meeting."

Moved by Trustee Dickson,

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee report, dated 5 March 2025, be received, as amended.

Carried

During discussion and in response to queries, the following information was noted:

- Members expressed the desire to capture more meeting discussion in the minutes as SEAC plays a role in informing the Committee of the Whole (COW) of special education needs, through meeting minutes;
- It was clarified that minutes are not intended to capture verbatim discussion but rather points of action and broad themes. Discussion is captured in the video recordings of the meetings. Staff reassured the Committee that they will work alongside Governance Services to ensure different aspects of discussion are captured; and
- Members who sit on SEAC and the COW are able to raise SEAC related issues at COW meetings either as part of receiving the SEAC report or during new business.

5.2 Forward Agenda

The SEAC forward agenda was provided for information.

6. Presentations

6.1 OCDSB Budget Update (Kevin Gardner)

Finance General Manager Gardner presented an update of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) Budget for the 2025-2026 school year. He highlighted the current financial position of the OCDSB and the subsequent steps that need to be taken in the upcoming school year.

During discussion and in response to queries, the following information was noted:

- The importance of preparing a balanced budget was raised as the District is facing financial challenges in the upcoming budget. In past years, the District had accumulated surplus to draw upon to address deficits. Due to COVID-19, this reserved funding has been depleted. Staff is now tasked with identifying targeted areas of savings to produce a balanced budget. There is a preliminary savings target of \$20 million, which is just under 2% of the total annual operating budget;
- 81% of the annual budget is compensation costs and the District is reliant on finding other areas of savings to make up for any overage. For the upcoming budget approval process, 80 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) roles including non academic positions have been identified as areas to consider. Other operating costs, such as supplies and services, continue to escalate due to inflationary factors but will also be considered. It was clarified however, that staff is working diligently to ensure funding saving measures have minimal effect on students and classroom operations;
- One of the difficulties staff has experienced when developing this budget is that the District has not yet received funding and grants from the Ministry of Education (MOE). Core education funding is expected at the end of April 2025 and once generated, will determine what the District receives in revenue;
- The estimated cost of occasional teachers for special education increased by \$300,000 from the 2024-2025 school year. It was clarified that the budget underestimated occasional teaching costs. Through analysis of the revised estimates, it was determined that an increase of \$300,000 would be required;
- The revised estimates take into account any cost of living adjustments in contracts and the additional funding to support that. The MOE has not released funding for the District as yet but with student enrollment remaining stable, it is anticipated that funding benchmarks will remain the same as well; and
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Ortho funding that was previously allocated to the District is now known as Priorities and Partnership Funding. Funding previously directed for this purpose has shifted to

be included in board discretionary funding. There is a commitment to reviewing how funding was previously used and consider how different envelopes of funding can be distributed to support schools in a similar and equitable way. Efforts are also being made to align the service delivery model with funding received from the MOE.

a. OCDSB Budget Feedback

The committee was separated into break out groups for 15 minutes to discuss the 2025-2026 budget and gather feedback for staff to consider in the coming year.

During discussion and in response to queries, the following information was noted:

- Members placed emphasis on providing educators and EAs with more professional development with specific focus on special education and supporting students with a variety of needs. Concern was raised regarding the reductions in staff due to budgetary pressures. It was highlighted that building competencies for remaining educators and EAs is crucial as staff need to be further equipped to support the wide array of student needs in classrooms;
- Communication with parents and caregivers remains a priority. Connecting families with existing resources and processes is key in providing specialized supports for students while also alleviating some of the strain many educators and EAs experience. Communication with parents and caregivers also extends to include ensuring clarity when providing families with information to ensure that misinformation and false narratives are not transmitted;
- Members proposed that change management and transition support for families be made available to ensure consistency across schools and promote inclusivity and equity; and
- It was suggested that staff take a different approach to learning resource teachers and learning support teachers allocations to find more effective ways to support students with special needs.

7. Department Update

7.1 Superintendent's Report

The meeting recessed at 8:27 p.m. and resumed at 8:34 p.m.

Superintendent Stoudt reported the following:

- April is World Autism Awareness Month and World Autism Awareness Day is on 2 April 2025. The OCDSB is welcoming Dr. Grant Bruno to speak at a virtual session on "Decolonizing Autism: A Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) Perspective" on 10 April 2025. Throughout April, schools will receive information to be distributed and the OCDSB website will have resources available to celebrate and honour the experiences and identities of those on the autism spectrum. A video series highlighting myths and misunderstanding about autism will be posted to the District website featuring OCDSB students and staff;
- The OCDSB Speaker Series are free information sessions provided to parents and staff to access leading ideas in education and allow the District to work collaboratively to better support student learning and well-being. On 27 March 2025 a speaker series event was held and OCDSB Program Manager and Social Worker, Melissa Chung, alongside colleagues from Parent Lifeline Eastern Ontario (PLEO), led a question and answer group on the challenges of student attendance and school refusal with about 200 families participating. Recordings of all speaker series events are available on the OCDSB website; and
- The Resource Fair: Transition Planning for Youth with Intellectual Disabilities was held at Confederation Education Centre on 27 March 2025. Over 150 families and 40 community partners were in attendance. Gratitude was extended to the staff for organizing this valuable event and their ability to pivot as this event was postponed from February due to inclement weather.

8. Discussion

8.1 Elementary Program Review (EPR)

Chair Miedema shared an overview of the feedback received from members and community organizations represented on SEAC regarding the Elementary Program Review (EPR) as it relates to the committee. Chair Miedema collected feedback to inform the Board of the committee's stance on the EPR and proposed phasing out of the 39 specialized program and alternative classes to give trustees a fulsome understanding of the position of each group represented on SEAC.

During discussion and in response to queries, the following information was noted:

- Members for the proposed changes in the EPR highlighted that the EPR makes efforts to create community schools where all students within given neighbourhoods can attend together with resources provided for the inclusion of all students;

- Members against the proposed changes in the EPR highlighted that the closing of specialized program classes without fully resourced alternative undermines inclusive education model for students with complex needs. The potential to provide community based education to students is overshadowed by the risks posed by the lack of specialized support for students with diverse special needs. It was noted that while there are attempts to minimize transitions for children in community schools, the EPR does not take into account specialized program classrooms and the various pathways for students in a fulsome way;
- Concern was raised regarding potential ostracization of students with complex needs in mainstream classrooms without necessary accommodations for complex special or medical needs; and
- Members highlighted that there is insufficient information for parents and caregivers to make informed decisions on how mainstream classroom supports will improve for students with complex learning needs; as the 39 classrooms are possibly phased out, and requested further clarification on how students with various academic needs will receive necessary aid to support learning.

9. Action Item

9.1 Motion from Sonja Elliot: re Elementary Program Review

Moved by Sonja Elliot,

Whereas the members of Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) are representing their community associations and community representatives; and

Whereas the model proposed in the Elementary Program Review recommends the closure of 39 specialized program classes (SPCs); and

Whereas the SEAC has a responsibility to advise the Board on matters related to special education, including matters related to specialized program classes; and

Whereas the SEAC has debated and discussed the model and the potential impact of closing the 39 SPCs;

Therefore be It Resolved

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) recommends that the Board of Trustees reject the closure of the 39 specialized program classes identified in the Elementary Program Review's proposed model.

Carried

10. Committee Reports

10.1 Board

There was no report from the Board.

10.2 Committee of the Whole

There was no report from the Committee of the Whole.

10.3 Committee of the Whole, Budget

Ottawa- Carleton Assembly of School Councils (OCASC) representative Anthony Wong shared information on the deficit in the 2025-2026 budget. He noted requests to offset reduction of support staff across the District and to limit the impact on EA and educators. A suggestion for the OCDSB to utilize university resources to mitigate impacts on the budget was also proposed.

11. New Business

OCASC representative Anthony Wong proposed that an item be added to the forward agenda to discuss parent concerns regarding individual education plans (IEP) and testing requirements for students, in relation to student evaluation with emphasis on support for students with special learning needs.

Autism Ontario representative Sonja Elliott requested an orientation on governance and committee bylaws to ensure all members are properly informed on correct procedures for meetings.

It was shared that under the leadership of the Minister of Diversity, inclusion and Persons with Disabilities, Accessibility Standards Canada (ASC) is developing a mandatory accessibility standard for federal organizations, agencies and departments. ASC is currently inviting people to participate in a public review of the draft regulations. They are seeking persons with disabilities and/or lived experience, service providers, accessibility specialists and those who have experienced barriers when accessing related services to provide unique perspectives on the topic. Feedback will be accepted until 14 April 2025.

12. Upcoming Meeting Dates

The upcoming meeting dates were provided for information.

13. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 9:32 p.m.

Cathy Miedema, Chair, Special
Education Advisory Committee