

## SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

**Wednesday, May 13, 2020**

**7:00 p.m.**

**Zoom Meeting**

Members:	Christine Boothby (Trustee), Rob Campbell (Trustee), Chris Ellis (Trustee), Sonia Nadon-Campbell (Community Representative), Jim Harris (VOICE for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children), Susan Cowin (Community Representative), Rob Kirwan (Community Representative), Mark Wylie (Down Syndrome Association), Cathy Miedema (Association for Bright Children), Nicole Ullmark (Easter Seals Ontario), Dr. Maggie Mamen (Learning Disabilities Association of Ottawa-Carleton), Katie Ralph (Autism Ontario, Ottawa Chapter), Ian Morris (Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders), Lisa Paterick (VIEWS for the Visually Impaired), Safina Dewshi (Ottawa-Carleton Assembly of School Councils)
Association Representatives (Non-Voting):	Susan Gardner (Ottawa-Carleton Elementary Teachers' Federation), Connie Allen (Professional Student Services Personnel), Nancy Dlouhy (Ottawa-Carleton Elementary Operations Committee), Jean Trant (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, SSP), Catherine Houlden (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Teachers), Daniel Bersyniow-Naane (Student Senator)
Staff and Guests:	Lynn Scott (Trustee), Justine Bell (Trustee), Peter Symmonds (Superintendent of Learning Support Services), Christine Kessler (System Principal, Learning Support Services), Amy Hannah (System Principal Learning Support Services), Stacey Kay (Manager, Learning Support Services), Nicole Guthrie (Manager, Board Services), Leigh Fenton (Board/Committee Coordinator)

1. Call to Order

Chair Nadon-Campbell called the meeting to order at 7:06 p.m.

2. Approval of the Agenda

**Moved by Chris Ellis,**

**THAT the agenda be approved.**

**Carried**

3. Review of Special Education Advisory Committee Report

3.1 11 March 2020

Moved by Sue Cowin,

THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee Report dated 11 March 2020 be received.

Ms. Houlden requested that the following changes be made on folio seven:

- That the reference to Catherine Houlden be revised to reflect the correct spelling of her last name; and
- That her recommendation be revised to read "Ms. Houlden recommended the collection of Individual Education Plan (IEP) data for the number of students in each secondary pathway, for example, locally developed to workplace, applied to college and academic to university. The ASAR showed success levels at the locally developed and applied levels are much lower than academic. The applied and locally developed pathways have significantly more students with IEPs than in the academic pathway. This would be valuable data for SEAC and the system in order to support academic success for special education students."

**Moved by Sue Cowin,**

**THAT the Special Education Advisory Committee Report dated 11 March 2020 be received, as amended.**

**Carried**

4. Department Update

4.1 Superintendent's Report

Superintendent Symmonds and the Learning Support Services (LSS) team reported on the following items meriting particular attention for students with special education needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. He acknowledged the

uncertain landscape in public education at this time and that he does not have any advance knowledge as to the date of the return to regular school days in District facilities.

a. Cancellation of Summer Learning Program

After considerable deliberation with due regard for both current Ottawa Public Health guidelines and the safety and well-being of students and staff, the summer learning program for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and/or Developmental Disabilities (DD) has been cancelled. The parents who access these programs were notified. The advance notification may help families' access options for programming elsewhere in the city.

In response to a query by Mr. Kirwan, Superintendent Symmonds responded that in order to operate the summer learning program, logistics and programming plans are normally put into effect in March, with staff being hired in May. As a result of the pandemic and the present lack of ministry and public health guidance on opening facilities to the public, amendments to cleaning protocols and personal distancing, staff made the difficult decision to cancel the program for 2020.

b. Update on Central Bargaining

Agreements have been reached with all education workers' unions and teachers' federations. It is anticipated that central agreements will be ratified by the end of May 2020. Negotiations on local issues are ongoing.

c. Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs)

The Ministry of Education released Memorandum: *Continuity of Learning for Students with Special Education Needs and Mental Health Supports* on 21 April 2020, which stipulated the expectation that district school boards continue to conduct the annual review conducted by the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRCs) as set out under Ontario Regulation 181/98.

IPRC reviews typically occur in May and June of each school year.

Learning Support Services (LSS) has consulted with representatives from several key groups to determine strategies to assist in meeting responsibilities with respect to the IPRC process in the current context.

This review system was historically a paper-based process, completed during an in-person evaluation. The following strategies are in place to move the process forward digitally:

- The School Messenger System informs parents and guardians that important information regarding their child's IPRC is forthcoming;

- Data reported by office administrators verify email contacts to reach families;
- Google forms distributed to all parents/guardians and students over 16 years old, provide options to waive or participate in a telephone or video conference IPRC;
- A close partnership with Business & Learning Technologies (B&LT), ensures use of virtual platforms meet the thresholds to protect the personal and health information of students; and
- Translation support is provided for the IPRC process.

Some IPRC's may be deferred until September. Transition support is in place for students either moving from a regular classroom to a specialized placement program or from one location to another.

In response to a query from Trustee Ellis, Superintendent Symmonds explained that the ability to receive encrypted files from psychologists was in place in advance of the school closures. The Professional Services Personnel collaborate directly with professionals in the community and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) to acquire information to best serve the student under review.

d. Distribution of Special Equipment Amount (SEA) Equipment

A variety of equipment technology and physical equipment have been distributed to students. This endeavour has been completed in collaboration with B&LT and school administrators for technology equipment. Specialized equipment was assigned through LSS, networking with school administrators and professionals to review the request and organize delivery to student homes.

There is a total of 5727 SEA Assistive technology devices (PPA) approved in the District. Devices were deployed district-wide on three separate dates with a total of 1271 pieces of SEA Assistive technology equipment distributed. The distribution was facilitated by courier service and, in some cases, families elected a curbside pick-up. In addition, 9000 pieces of non-SEA equipment were distributed during this time, coupled with 2000 wireless local-area networks ("hot spots"). Additional requests are being examined on a case by case basis. At this time they are addressing new situations involving cases where the equipment has broken and requires repair.

Physical equipment is recommended by occupational or physiotherapists therapists. When requests were made to borrow these pieces of equipment, after an initial assessment, the equipment was sent as soon as possible to the student with training and instructions for the parent or guardian.

Blind and Low Vision students are being supported, teacher to student, with supplementary learning material, and the same elevated standard of support

is being extended to deaf and hard of hearing students. The itinerant teachers connect with these families on a regular basis to ensure that all equipment required by those students is in place.

e. Learning Support Services Support for Students and Educators

When the closure was announced by the Minister of Education on 13 March 2020, Learning Support Consultants began working with students and teachers immediately in the specialized program classes to help with the delivery for the District's Learn At Home phase. LSS central teams created a comprehensive assortment of professional learning opportunities for educators. Topics include: Communication, Mental Health, Self-Regulation, and Use of Technology. The workshops have been well attended. . Superintendent Symmonds added that these learning opportunities may be continued into the future when classes resume at the schools.

Committee members requested that data be collected on the engagement of the Learn At Home program, specifically for students in the specialized program classes.

f. Results from Thoughtexchange Outreach: Feedback from Students, Parents and Community

The purpose of the Thoughtexchange was to better understand the experiences of students and parents with learning at home. The exchange ran from Thursday, April 9 to midnight on Thursday, April 16. The number of participants rose to 7012 people at the close of the survey. Main themes were family stress /life balance, communicating consistently, equity of access, difficulty with motivation, access to technology, French assignments for English-speaking parents and the volume of work for students. Through thoughtful consideration of the feedback received, the District has adapted to the situation of teaching from afar and modernized practices. In response to questions, the following points were noted:

- Transition supports will be required to support students' return to the school setting, away from their homes;
- Mr. Bersyniow-Naane noted the approach to on-line learning functions best for him when teachers are available to host help sessions;
- Through the results of the survey, parents and students alike began receiving the same learning instructions from teachers;
- In the future, on-line learning platforms will need to be accessed using a single log-in with one password;
- Families who are least likely to respond to a survey are experiencing the greatest struggle; and

- Superintendent Symmonds noted that LSS has been working with the principals at Clifford Bowey Public School and Crystal Bay Centre for Special Education to ensure families are supported. The psychologists, speech language therapists, board certified behaviour analysts and mental health teams all connected with their student clients at the beginning of the home isolation period and have been in continual contact, as needed.

g. Mental Health Support for Students

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted feelings of well-being, creating sadness and fear. The District's mental health workers are working to provide support for well-being for both students and families. "Wellness checks" are done in collaboration with the school teams to ensure families are not overwhelmed with too many calls from the school board. During these check-ins, support staff have discovered that some students who have low to moderate anxiety are functioning well, however those cases with more severe depression are not. The multidisciplinary teams are now taking on new referrals.

The Education Foundation of Ottawa is supporting vulnerable students in the District. Through a program called 'Bridges over Barriers', \$26,000 dollars has been directed towards students who fall under the crisis umbrella. This fund is established based on the values of equity and the need for early intervention, with a commitment to maintaining the dignity of every individual who is a benefactor of this fund.

5. New Business

5.1 Current Challenges and Opportunities

In advance of the meeting, the committee was invited to send questions to LSS representing concerns from their respective organizations. Listed below are the questions (Q) from the committee and answers (A) from the LSS team:

**Q: Given that some of our organizations take advantage of the Community Use of Schools (CUS) program to facilitate programming, can you provide any update or guidance to help manage planning for any summer programs?**

A: At this point the District is still waiting for direction from the province and Ottawa Public Health. The District has not confirmed any CUS applications, yet. Decisions will be made once details about provincial expectations as well as requirements for cleaning protocols and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), and availability of staff are known.

**Q: School closures have placed immense pressure on the school system to adapt to a new teaching and learning environment. In emergency learning, it can be expected that it will not be business as usual. Would LSS be able**

**to provide comments on the work done to smooth out the variance between teachers and the delivery of emergency learning? As time progresses, the system should continue to evolve and better serve those who have special needs as they are sometimes the least likely to profit from emergency learning opportunities.**

A: From the outset of the emergency closure, LSS staff started reaching out to teachers in specialized program classes and LSTs to coordinate support for students and staff. LSS has developed an extensive assortment of professional learning opportunities for all educators (teachers, EAs, ECEs) that have been positively received. LSS have heard a variety of responses from families. For example, some families are under greater pressure due to the specific needs of students and requirements for one-to-one support provided by a parent/caregiver. In other circumstances, children who struggled in face-to-face sessions are finding the online learning model to be much more preferable.

**Q: Given that many special education students require someone to sit beside them as certain concepts are taught and demonstrated, sometimes even hand-over-hand, how will this be handled if social distancing is required?**

A: The District is working with Ottawa Public Health (OPH) who are providing guidance on protocols. OPH was instrumental in guiding access to our schools to gather technology for distribution, distribution of physical equipment and courier options for delivery. The District will be taking direction from OPH about those specific situations.

**Q: When will Individual Education Plans (IEPs) be adjusted to reflect the new realities?**

A: It is expected that IEPs remain in effect during the closure. The Ministry provided direction that in situations where existing accommodations, modifications, or alternative programming are not feasible, school boards should work collaboratively with students and families to determine workable solutions on a case-by-case basis. Education Assistants are keeping engaged with their students with check-ins, instruction on music and movement, along with relaxation techniques.

**Q: Given that on-line learning is contraindicated for students with Learning Disabilities, and other special education students, how will academic expectations be adjusted?**

A: Academic expectations are being adjusted for all students. The Ministry has indicated that marks cannot decrease since the closure in March. Teachers are working on what final course assignments will look like. There will be a variety of accommodations necessary next year as students return to school.

**Q: If a high-school course is offered on-line, is there a guarantee that it will also be offered in person so that LD/Spec Ed students are not**

**discriminated against because they cannot perform the on-line component?**

A: At this point, there is no guarantee of what future opportunities will look like. At secondary, the District is working to augment support for students with additional staffing working alongside the Student Success Teacher. Staff have also prioritized the development of a tool to allow students to demonstrate learning expectations across courses. Innovation and Adolescent Learning has been doing great work to support the system. While exams and PA Days have been cancelled, students will still have summative tasks to complete. These will vary by course and information is being provided as it becomes available.

**Q: What is the plan to help special education students recover from the time away from classrooms, especially in early literacy and numeracy?**

A: Students will have had varied experiences through the closure. There will be a variety of accommodations and shifts next year in recognition that students may have missed out on certain learning opportunities. Joel Westheimer, University of Ottawa, wrote on the topic of the closure and while there are lots of challenges, learning takes place in lots of different formats. In his article Westheimer indicated that there's no evidence of long-term damage to children from missing a few months of school. Staff will strive to meet kids where they are at when they return to more typical learning environments. In the meantime, the District is engaged in a variety of professional learning opportunities which will support deeper knowledge and changes in practice. For example, if an educator is able to enhance their skills in supporting a student with autism, then a future face-to-face learning opportunity may actually be better for the student. Educators and students are becoming more familiar with the Google Suite of applications. This will benefit our students who require the use of assistive technology.

Elementary Virtual Summer School for students currently in Grades 6 - 8 will run using Google Meet and Google Classroom in July. The focus is closing the gaps for students. Students may be registered for mornings and/or afternoons. They may be registered for math and/or language. Students with IEPs will be accommodated as applicable in the Google environment and for those with modified programs, the IEP will be the starting point for programming. Classes run with 12 - 15 students but there may be waitlists. Parents who are interested in enrolling students may do so through their current school staff.

For secondary, there will be credit recovery opportunities using Google Meet and Google Classroom for those students who did not earn a credit in either Semester 1 or 2. Summer credit courses will run through the eLearning Virtual Learning Environment (Brightspace/D2L). It is a faster pace learning environment, as teachers cover the entire semester of material in 3 weeks. Where accommodations outlined in IEPs are applicable to this environment, they



will be honoured, such as additional time for an assessment, copies of notes, etc.

The OCDSB is part of the Ontario eLearning Consortium, which means that our students have access to courses offered in other Districts. Students seeking a course should speak with their guidance counsellor.

**Q: Has anyone been tracking the rates of engagement with the on-line materials so that decisions as to whether to continue this option can be based on actual usage data?**

A: We are coordinating with principals who liaise with their educators regarding student engagement. The District is working collaboratively with OPH and the Red Cross to help ensure we are reaching those families and students who have completely disengaged.

**Q: All younger students will have a hard time maintaining social distance, not just with their peers but even more so with their teachers, Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and Executive Assistants (EAs). Is it recognized that they and many special education students will likely be made more anxious and even traumatized by this aspect of the return to school? What is planned in order to mitigate the effects of this? What will the consequences be for a child or staff member who breaks this rule?**

It is anticipated that some students may experience some challenges upon returning to school. LSS are discussing the necessity to shift mental health supports from typical work during the initial phases of the return to school to respond to emerging needs as they present.. There has been no discussion on consequences for failing to meet the expectations. The focus is on teaching and reinforcing the expectations.

**Q: What is happening with children trying to access specialty congregated programs, when tiering has not been monitored or achieved this year? Are we going to relax the application requirements?**

A: LSS will proceed with an electronic/virtual process. Referrals for next year have been received and staff aim to provide review information to support IPRCs in the coming weeks. IPRC decisions may be delayed this year. The goal is to give parents as much time as necessary to discuss options, but timelines will be compressed.

The criteria will not be relaxed, however, some information may be missing or incomplete. Professional support staff will try to bridge the gap using their professional judgment to ensure that no student is disadvantaged by the model this year.

**Q: Are we able to offer training sessions to parents or other caregivers away from school by phone or conference call (instruction, regulation, equipment use)?**

A: When requested or required, training is provided to support parents and guardians.

## 5.2 Planning to Return to School – Breakout Group Discussion

Superintendent Symmonds highlighted that planning for the return to schools is on-going. LSS sought the input of committee members for suggestions and important matters to consider in the planning for the return to school for special education students

The committee was divided into three discussion groups. Key considerations were summarized in the following points:

- Develop a non-academic plan to help with the transition back into schools which will prioritize emotional and behaviours needs. The District's approach to re-entry must be highly individualized;
- Many children with anxiety will require more support than previously provided;
- Can each child be assessed individually to see where they stand from a mental well-being perspective and in relation to the baseline for their grade level;
- When returning to school, priority of re-entry to be given to students accessing special education needs and elementary students;
- Welcome Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students back to class in an intentional way with gradual phases, reducing risks in social competence. Routines will need to be re-learned;
- Should class sizes become smaller with social distancing measures, consideration of available staff to teach in the extra classes is necessary along with assessment of space requirements for smaller classes inside schools currently at capacity and over-capacity;
- Invest in strengthening the abilities of teaching staff to bolster the business of learning and solidify foundational skills of the teaching profession.
- Bolster learning equity gaps;
- Provide more online resources, programs and online help sessions to prepare for future virtual class environments;
- Re-examine the proposed budget for 2020-2021 as extraordinary times require extraordinary measures, accounting for the need for special extra supports; and
- Should the government provide any extra funding for transitions back into schools, the funding would be best spent on teaching support within the schools.
- Clifford Bowey Public School and Crystal Bay Centre for Special Education and schools with high needs students will require a slower integration and may need to be the last to return;
- To avoid the gaps that will have inevitably occurred in students with IEPs personalized messaging from teachers and diagnostics may be required.

Teachers will require additional professional development to ensure they are prepared to provide the support required to close the gaps;

- The flexibility of a blended system, some in-school days and some home-school days, may work well for some students;
- Communications regarding mental health and mental health supports will be important as students, students transition back to school;
- Well-being is the key to literacy, numeracy, and life skill acquisition. It will be important to foster a sense of belonging as students transition to schools;
- Laying the foundation for learning may take time and it will be important to move slowly to ensure all students feel safe and well;
- Professional development for teachers specifically on differentiation will be critical as the range of students' abilities will have increased during the school closure;
- The 2020-2021 budget must include additional resources to ensure students are appropriately supported.

Superintendent Symmonds thanked the committee for all contributions.

6. Adjournment

Chair Nadon-Campbell stated that further specific feedback on any of the subjects discussed can be sent via email to both her and Superintendent Symmonds.

The meeting adjourned at 9:09 p.m.

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Sonia Nadon-Campbell, Chair, Special Education Advisory Committee