



*Office of the Chair of the Board
Chair of SEAC*

June 8, 2016

The Honourable Liz Sandals, M.P.P.
Minister of Education
Ontario Ministry of Education
900 Bay Street, 22nd Floor, Mowat Block
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

Dear Minister Sandals:

We are writing to advocate on behalf of the close to 17,000 students receiving essential Special Education support in the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB).

Over the past two years, ongoing Ministry of Education cuts to our Special Education High Needs Amount (HNA) Grants totalling close to \$7 million has placed a significant burden on our Board as we strive to meet the growing number of special needs students. These cuts are not only debilitating to our Board, but disheartening to the hundreds of Special Education teachers entrusted with the care of the most vulnerable youth in our system.

The TCDSB Board of Trustees and the members of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) respectfully request that your Ministry reconsider these cuts and restore Special Education HNA funding to previous levels. Additionally, the Ministry's special education funding formula, which is based on average provincial benchmarks is inappropriate. Similar to the experience of our coterminous Toronto public school board, providing special services to students with identified exceptionalities in the most diverse city in the world brings with it challenges not faced by other boards in the province.

In the Ministry's B-6 Memo dated June 8, 2011, school boards were informed of a four per cent increase as a recognition of regional variations in capital construction and renewal costs. This applied a geographic adjustment factor (GAF) intended to address the higher costs and programmatic challenges confronting a large urban board like the TCDSB in the nation's largest city. We find it ironic that the Ministry would acknowledge these differences when financing bricks and mortar, yet remains staunchly opposed to using this same principle when funding the more important "human capital" side of our mandate – the education of students.

Special Education programs are central to our moral purpose as a school board and how we deliver appropriate special education-based intervention and support. The HNA cuts, coupled with the chronic underfunding of an already financially overburdened Special Education Department, jeopardizes the academic achievement and wellbeing of every student in our system, not just those with special needs.

As the largest publicly funded Catholic school board in the province representing over half-a-million stakeholders, we cannot continue to absorb the negative impact on students and urge you to stop the cascading series of cuts to Special Education funding.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,



Angela Kennedy
Chair of the Board

Marilyn Taylor
Chair, SEAC

Cc: TCDSB Board of Trustees

All Ontario School Boards' Special Education Advisory Committees

Angela Gauthier, Director of Education

Cristina Fernandes, Superintendent, Special Services

Education Council

Ministry of Education

Minister

Mowat Block
Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1L2

Ministère de l'Éducation

Ministre

Edifice Mowat
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Ontario

August 24, 2016

Ms. Angela Kennedy
Chair of the Board
Toronto Catholic District School Board
80 Sheppard Avenue East
Toronto ON M2N 6E8

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Dear Ms. Kennedy,

Thank you for your letter of June 8, 2016, originally addressed to my predecessor, the Honourable Liz Sandals, on behalf of the Toronto Catholic District School Board about special education funding. Please know that your sincere commitment to students with special education needs is appreciated, and I am pleased to respond.

Our government is committed to ensuring that every student has access to the supports they need to succeed in school, including students with special education needs. We are making changes to be more responsive to the needs of all students and to increase our focus on supporting their achievement and well-being.

The Ministry of Education provides Ontario's 72 publicly-funded district school boards with additional funding through the Special Education Grant (SEG) for students with special education needs to support the incremental costs of the additional programs, services, and equipment required to meet their educational needs and to support positive outcomes. This enables equity for all students with special education needs.

Special Education Grant funding is incremental to the Foundation Grants and other special purpose grants of our ministry's education funding model, the Grants for Student Needs (GSN). School boards have the authority and flexibility to use other GSN funding, as well as the Special Education Grant SEG, to meet their responsibility to support students with special education needs.

The SEG is projected to increase to approximately \$2.76 billion in 2016-17. This represents an increase of approximately \$43.2 million or 1.6 per cent over 2015-16; and \$1.14 billion or 70 per cent since 2002-03.

In the case of Toronto Catholic District School Board, its total Special Education Grant funding allocation is projected to be nearly \$121.2 million in 2016-17. This represents an increase of nearly \$42.4 million or 53.8 per cent since 2002-03.

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As you know, the new DSENA allocation (formerly the High Needs Amount) was introduced in 2014-15 to better reflect the variation among boards with respect to students with special education needs, and boards' ability to meet these needs, thus making the DSENA allocation more fair and equitable.

The new DSENA allocation uses three components to reflect this variation: the Measures of Variability, the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model and a Base Amount for Collaboration and Integration. Similar to the geographic adjustment factor that accounts for variations in need for capital construction, the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model estimates the likelihood of students in a school board needing special education programs and/or services. The model does this by taking into account neighbourhood profiles *for all* students across Ontario in each school board, and considering long form census factors, such as parent level of education, family income, unemployment and recent immigration to Canada.

Ministry staff have been consulting with stakeholders on the evolution of the DSENA allocation, including meeting with the Special Education Funding Working Group since 2008, and we will continue to work with stakeholders on the evolution of the DSENA funding allocation over the 2016-17 school year.

While this transition to a more fair and equitable DSENA model is provincially fiscally neutral, it will have redistribution impacts among boards, such as the Toronto Catholic District School Board. To mitigate this impact the new DSENA model is being phased in over four years (2014-15 to 2017-18), and despite projected enrolment declines the ministry is holding the provincial DSENA total allocation at \$1.05 billion over the four year transition.

Thank you for writing to share your concerns and recommendations with me. Please be assured that I understand your concerns, and will keep them in mind as we move forward. I trust this information is helpful to you.

Sincerely,



Mitzie Hunter, MBA
Minister

December XX, 2016

The Honourable Mitzie Hunter, M.P.P.
Minister of Education
Ontario Ministry of Education
900 Bay Street
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

Dear Minister Hunter:

We have had the opportunity to review your letter of August 24, 2016, in response to the Toronto Catholic District School Board's written request for the Ministry of Education to reconsider the significant cuts being made to Special Education funding that is adversely impacting the 17,000 students with exceptionalities who receive essential learning support services.

The Ministry claims the overall increases in Special Education Grant funding benefits boards across the Ontario. For the record, the real fact is that this has been achieved on the backs of major urban boards like the TCDSB. A prime example is the Special Education High Needs (HNA) funding now called the DSENA Grant, has been spiralling downwards over the past three years: from \$51.7M in 2012-13 to \$47.4M in 2016-17. That is \$4.169M which has been taken from the TCDSB budget and redistributed to other school boards!

Special Education funding has also not kept pace with the special needs associated with Ministry's introduction of new programs such as Early Years learning (aka FDK). There has been a marked increase in the number of students in Kindergarten arriving with special needs. Many of these students have higher needs requiring additional human resources and intensive support programs. In particular, this is reflected in the 35 percent increase in the number of students diagnosed with autism since the Ministry mandated introduction of FDK. However, due to the nature of the age of these students, they are supported within the regular classroom which places significant pressures on in-class support for all students.

Over the past two years, ongoing Ministry of Education cuts to TCDSB's Special Education High Needs (HNA) Grants totalled close to \$7 million. This chronic underfunding by the Ministry jeopardizes the TCDSB's ability to provide adequate support to its most vulnerable students and poses a significant challenge supporting the growing number of special needs students.

Despite this underfunding, the TCDSB has made a concerted effort over the past two years to reduce its overspend in special services programming. These reductions have come at a significant cost to schools and school communities who are feeling the strain of having to do more with less staff.

The Board has not only reduced support staff, but also eliminated 90 percent of agency workers. In addition, Educational Assistant usage has been cut by approximately 100 staff members to deal with the removal of \$1.5 million high needs amount funding (Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount). This is an untenable situation as the number of students requiring special learning support services identified through an IEP has grown exponentially to 17,433 students, or close to 20 percent of the TCDSB's total student population of 90,000.

Your attention to this urgent request is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Cc: TCDSB Board of Trustees

Angela Gauthier, Director of Education

Cristina Fernandes, Superintendent, Special Services

Education Council

December XX, 2016

The Honourable Mitzie Hunter, M.P.P.
Minister of Education
Ontario Ministry of Education
900 Bay Street
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

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Once again, we urge your Ministry to honour the rights of special needs students. The **<insert # of members>** members of **<insert name of association>** respectfully request that your Ministry reconsider the cuts you have made and restore Special Education HNA funding to previous levels.

Should the Ministry continue to refuse to restore Special Education funding to appropriate levels, we will have no option but mobilize the thousands of parents of special needs students through our association and other partners to ensure this is top of mind for all voters and candidates during the next provincial election.

Your attention to this urgent request is appreciated.

Sincerely,