



June 23, 2017

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 Ontario. However, the fact is that this has been achieved on the backs of major urban boards like the TCDSB. For example, despite the continuing increase in the special education population, 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 the 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 overspending 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, which creates a negative impact on special needs student's achievement and mental health and well-being.

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, which clearly shows an identified need for increased support to ensure that the needs of Ontario's special needs students are met.

Once again, we urge your Ministry to honour the rights of special needs students. Autism Ontario, Toronto Chapter, respectfully requests 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 the Special Education funding to appropriate levels, we will have no option but to 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,



Melanie Battaglia, LL.B., M.A., B.A. (Hons.)

President

Autism Ontario, Toronto Metro Chapter

- c. Angela Gauthier, Director of Education, TCDSB (outgoing)
- Rory McGuckin, Director of Education, TCDSB (incoming)
- John Malloy, Director of Education, TDSB
- Margaret Spoelstra, Executive Director, Autism Ontario
- Kathleen Keane, President, Association for Bright Children of Ontario
- Cristina Fernandes, Superintendent, Special Services, TCDSB
- Uton Robinson, Executive Superintendent, Special Education and Section Programs, TDSB
- Marilyn Taylor, Chair, Special Education Advisory Committee, TCDSB
- David Lepofsky, Chair, Special Education Advisory Committee, TDSB