

Special Education Funding in Ontario: Bogged Down in Claims

Direct service to exceptional students is being sacrificed in Ontario to an inappropriately complex and flawed funding formula. Equally tragic is the pitting of special and regular education against each other in a quest for education dollars. Parents also have become entangled as they attempt to advocate within confusing funding parameters. Exceptional children caught on the battlefield are the losers.

Whether or not the current level of funding is congruent with the value and priority that Ontarians place on education has been widely discussed. Let us set aside for the moment that general debate and focus on some of the issues related to special education funding.

It is ironic that a government which espouses increased spending in the classroom and less on administration has put in place, perhaps inadvertently, grant procedures that have taken staff away from students. Actually, some of the motives driving the new formula are good. There has been an attempt to be fair in very complex circumstances. New grant claim procedures were

intended to recognize the unequal distribution of particularly needy students across the province. However, the formula misses the mark. A less cumbersome process which is less obsessed with policing boards' funding claims would leave more dollars for classroom use.

Special education grants are provided as layered funding.¹ Foundation and all other grants applicable to funding general education are used to provide basic services to exceptional and non-exceptional students alike. Special education grants are layered on top of the foundation grants to pay for the additional costs associated with special services and programs. In the case of a deaf student in Grade 10, for example, expenses associated with the placement in the Grade 10 class including teacher salaries, school administration, textbooks and furniture are covered by foundation grants. The layer of special education covers the costs of extra support provided by an itinerant hearing resource teacher, the school's special education resource teacher and a sign language interpreter as well as the individual FM hearing aid system.

Three grants are applied to the layer of special education services and support. The first, the Special Education Per Pupil Amount, is based on the total number of students that the board has enrolled. In 1999-2000, boards received \$362 for each elementary student and \$229 per secondary student. The other two grants, the Intensive Support Amount and the Special Incidence Portions, may be applied for by the board based on identified and documented individual student needs.

There are four types of Intensive Support Amount (ISA) grants. ISA 1 is for individualized special education equipment costing more than \$800, such as hearing aids and Braille. ISA 2 and 3 grants may be applied for, depending on the amount of intensive specialist teacher and paraprofessional support required. The values of ISA 2 and 3 claims are \$12,000 and \$27,000, respectively. ISA 4 grants cover costs associated with education programs provided by boards in partnership with care and treatment programs, usually within mental health or corrections facilities.

Boards may apply for Special Incidence Portions grants on behalf of students who have extremely high needs for staff-intensive supports. Claim vary with identified need to a maximum of \$27,000 per student. Qualifying students generally require the individual attention of more than two staff in order to safely attend school. Most qualifying students have complex physical and/or mental needs.

So where have things gone wrong and what can we do to ensure that a greater proportion of limited special education funding is directed to teaching and learning? Of particular concern are the ISA 2 and 3 claim procedures, the balance between ISA and Special Education Per Pupil Amount grants and the impact of

recent regular education reforms on demands for special education. Solutions will require not only refinements to the funding formula but also shifts in our thinking about the nature and purpose of special education.

ISA 2 and 3 Claim Procedures

In developing the ISA grant formula, an assumption seems to have been made that a process which has worked fairly well in the past with deaf and blind students also would be workable with all other exceptional students. Procedures referred to as 'in-lieu funding' were used until last year to determine grants for intensive programs provided to students with vision and hearing deficits. This in-lieu model seems to have been expanded and emerged as the claims process for ISA 2 and 3 funding.² However, the numbers of deaf and blind pupils are small and their degree of disability more reliably measured than most other exceptionalities. When an attempt was made to expand this process to encompass all exceptionalities, it created a nightmare of complexity, ambiguity and volume.

In the past, a board with a total student population of 50,000 would gather extensive documentation for 15 or so students in preparation of its in-lieu grant application. Now, with individual claims required for all students with intensive need, the number of applications necessary is likely to approach 1,250. Each claim takes about two hours to compile, if supporting documentation is readily available. Often, however, additional assessments must be completed and reports written. This is both time-consuming and problematic in the many districts in which access to multidisciplinary assessment is limited.

This year, boards received ISA claim procedures from the Ministry of Education in late March. The Ministry required that applications be compiled and information submitted by the end of April. Boards were responsible for training their staff in the gathering and preparation of individual claims based on the 63-page resource manual and a one-day, train-the-trainer workshop provided by the Ministry. Boards prepared and submitted a master claim covering all students deemed eligible. Ministry auditors visited each board, beginning in May, to check a sampling of student files for whom claims had been made.

The Ministry informed boards of the number of ISA 2 and 3 claim approvals on August 25, just five working days before school opening. This short time frame has left parents wondering about resources that will be available, staff uncertain about employment and boards scrambling to implement programs and services.

The short time line for preparing claims compromises the accuracy of claim preparation and the determination of whom to include. Acquisition of a current assessment report can be especially problematic. It is not uncommon for students who are obviously very needy to be omitted from the process or to have a claim denied due to lack of a current assessment that fits within Ministry guidelines.

Staff who work intensively with a student can be providing a very appropriate program that is based on daily observation and a thorough understanding of the student's needs. Yet the student may not meet claim criteria due to a lack of recent assessment paperwork and the time or resources to acquire it. Ironically, paperwork is often more readily available for students with moderate needs than those whose needs are obvious. For educators, priorities for individual

educational assessment are the complex cases in which degree and type of need are not obvious, thus requiring clinical assessment to shed light on the learning dynamics that are occurring. Generating assessment paperwork solely for funding purposes is unsettling.

The Minister of Education has stated that it is the government's intent to refine the funding formula.³ Hopefully, the refinement will include simplification, decreased frequency of claim submissions and use of the process with a more restricted portion of the exceptional student population. These changes are needed in order to reduce the amount of time required for the process, leaving more for classroom teaching, and to enable earlier notification to boards of their approved funding levels.

Balance between SEPPA and ISA Amounts

The Minister of Education has announced her intent to allow boards to use their ISA funding in ways that enable them to meet the wide range of special needs of exceptional students in their board.⁴ This seems to be a response to criticism that ISA funding has been tied too restrictively to covering the costs of paraprofessionals who often work full time with a single student. Boards have felt hampered in their attempts to pursue a variety of staffing arrangements that involve sharing resources among students rather than long-term attachment of educational assistants to students. Boards are able to use the Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) funding with greater flexibility than Intensive Support Amount (ISA) grants. Most would prefer heavier weighting be given the SEPPA to increase their flexibility and ability to respond to local needs.

An intrinsic problem with the ISA funding approach is that parents view funding generated through a claim made on behalf of their child as an entitlement. As long as individual claims are made, entitlement will be a difficult notion to dispel. Counting of high needs incidence as part of a board's September statistical report rather than as a separate process likely would be more efficient and be more accurately understood by parents as the activity it is meant to be – a demographic analysis. A move in this direction could reduce the number of Intensive Support Amount claims required and make possible a formula which increases the Special Education Per Pupil Amount weighting.

Impact of Education Reforms

The recent introduction of more rigorous achievement standards generally and the introduction of a secondary school literacy test, in particular, drive an urgent need for both remedial and alternative programs. Traditionally, these have been largely the domains of special education. If that is to continue, then special education's share of education funding will need to increase substantially. However, our students likely would be better served if remedial education and non-academic alternative programs were developed and included within the domain of regular education. Special education should focus on direct service and collaborative planning for students with the most significant special needs.

Now that we have rigorous standards, we must address the challenges created by those who cannot meet them or we will create a whole new set of social problems. The new standards do not make more students exceptional, but they do highlight a need for greater program diversifica-

tion within regular education. If we value inclusion, then we will broaden the base of regular education rather than expand separate special education programs.

Summary

Within an environment of constrained education funding, special education comes under particular scrutiny. It needs to be recognized that there are and have been more rigorous checks and balances on special education and exceptional student progress than on most aspects of education. Special Education Advisory Committees, Identification Placement and Review Committees, and Individual Education Plans all have been developed to monitor special education programs and services, and student progress. The addition of overly complex, time-consuming funding claims procedures is unnecessarily wasteful.

We do need to gather good data about special need incidence within districts. However, to do so by embedding the task into the funding claims process is an inappropriate and wasteful diversion of time and resources away from students. Reporting processes are already in place to gather demographic information from boards that could incorporate some greater detail about exceptional students more efficiently than using ISA 2 and 3 claims.

Significant challenges face boards in the wake of recently introduced curriculum and standards. Considerable energy and resources are required to assist challenged students achieve success within this new environment. There will be students who are challenged within the newly defined educational expectations but who have competencies that currently are untapped by the

programs offered. Regular and special education must make a concerted commitment to design and develop a range of programs and delivery that provide all students an equal opportunity to develop their unique competencies.

Beliefs and values that we share about education ultimately will guide the difficult funding decisions that need to be made. The short-term costs of providing individualized and appropriate education to exceptional students are substantial. However, the long-term costs of not building solid foundations are immeasurably greater.

Jim Bradt and Noreen Hardwick-Leclerc

Jim Bradt recently retired after 31 years as a classroom and special education teacher, consultant and administrator in North York, Lambton County, Simcoe County and with York University.

Noreen Hardwick-Leclerc has taught at the faculties of education of the University of Toronto, York University and Brock University, and recently retired from the Toronto Board of Education where she was a special education teacher and consultant, coordinator of inner city schools and school principal.

Endnotes

1. *2000-2001 Resource Manual for the Special Education Grant Intensive Support Amount (ISA), Guidelines For School Boards*, Ministry of Education, page 7.
2. In-lieu grants were available to boards for deaf, blind and deaf-blind students who were educated by choice within their own community but who met degree of need criteria for placement at a provincial school for the deaf or blind.
3. Minister's Announcement on Special Education, January 27, 2000.
4. Minister's Announcement on Special Education, January 27, 2000.

© 2000 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

The Caledon Institute of Social Policy
1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340
Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
Website: www.caledoninst.org