

HDSB special education recommendations guided by stakeholder perspectives

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Perspectives from 15 different focus groups were used as research for Phase 2 of Halton District School Board's special education review - a strategy that clashed with the expectations of certain members of the special education advisory committee (SEAC) recently.

Elana Gray, an external reviewer for Phase 2 of the review, presented the findings to the committee at J.W. Singleton Centre on March 6. She noted that through collecting information on current practices and procedures, this phase focused on examining the elementary special education referral, identification and placement options for students with autism, learning disabilities and giftedness.

The focus groups involved in the research were composed of school staff members, staff from student services, SEAC repre-

sentatives and parents of students with autism, learning disabilities and giftedness. In total, approximately 50 staff members and 50 parents volunteered to partake in the survey.

Gray noted that the key findings of these perspectives indicated parents in this particular sample expressed concern about implementation and development of individual education plans in the classrooms, as well as inconsistent referral practices from staff at different schools across the board. Parents also expressed the opinion that greater progress is seen from students in self-contained classes, rather than resource support classes.

Among staff, key concerns were expressed about the potential unreliability of primary gifted screening and a lack of contentment with screening success rates. They also voiced concern about inequities between the exceptionalities, saying they felt that primary iden-

tification is often expected for gifted children and not necessarily expected for students with autism or learning disabilities.

Trustee Amy Collard says the opinions expressed in the review were often inconsistent, noting that she finds it important for these perspectives to be presented in such a way that they are not confused with facts.

"There is an inconsistent referral process that seems to extend from a lack of staff knowledge, then we see that staff is unhappy with the low screening success rates and I have to wonder if that is because they are not adept as to who should be screened," she added.

"I think it's really important that these all be framed as perspectives and not as solid facts, because if we frame them as solid facts then we're about as inconsistent as the Bible."

Association for Bright Children's Sherry Foster then

voiced her disagreement about the perspectives presented to the committee.

"That really bothers me that these are just random people's perceptions that are now on a slide that are made to look like facts," she said. "I feel like this data and showing it publicly is very problematic especially since it's such a small handful of people with their opinions because you can find a very different group of 50 people with different opinions."

Gray, as well as superintendent of student services Mark Zonneveld, noted that while these perspectives will guide research and recommendations, they will not be framed as fact.

"We are conscious that 50 of each aren't really representative of all parents and staff, but they are all valid perspectives and voices that we want to hear," Zonneveld said.

The results were narrowed down to include these eight key special education recommenda-

tions for Phase 2:

- . To develop a special education and communication plan;
- . To improve communication and information sharing among staff members;
- . To use the Grade 4 screening assessment results to build other learning profiles in addition to giftedness;
- . To review and revise assessment criteria for each exceptionality with a focus on special education classes and programs;
- . To simplify the identification process for resource support placements;
- . To support primary students who demonstrate elements of giftedness in their home schools and to consider resource support and self-contained placements as well as extracurricular opportunities;
- . To continue providing learning opportunities for staff supporting primary students with learning disabilities and autism;
- . To review and improve the IEP development and implementation process.

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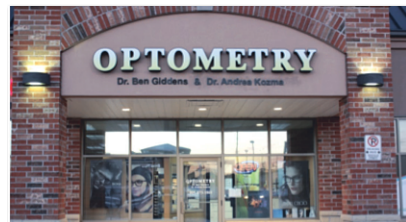
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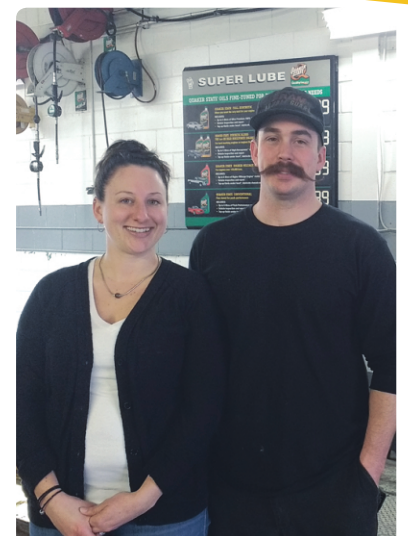
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