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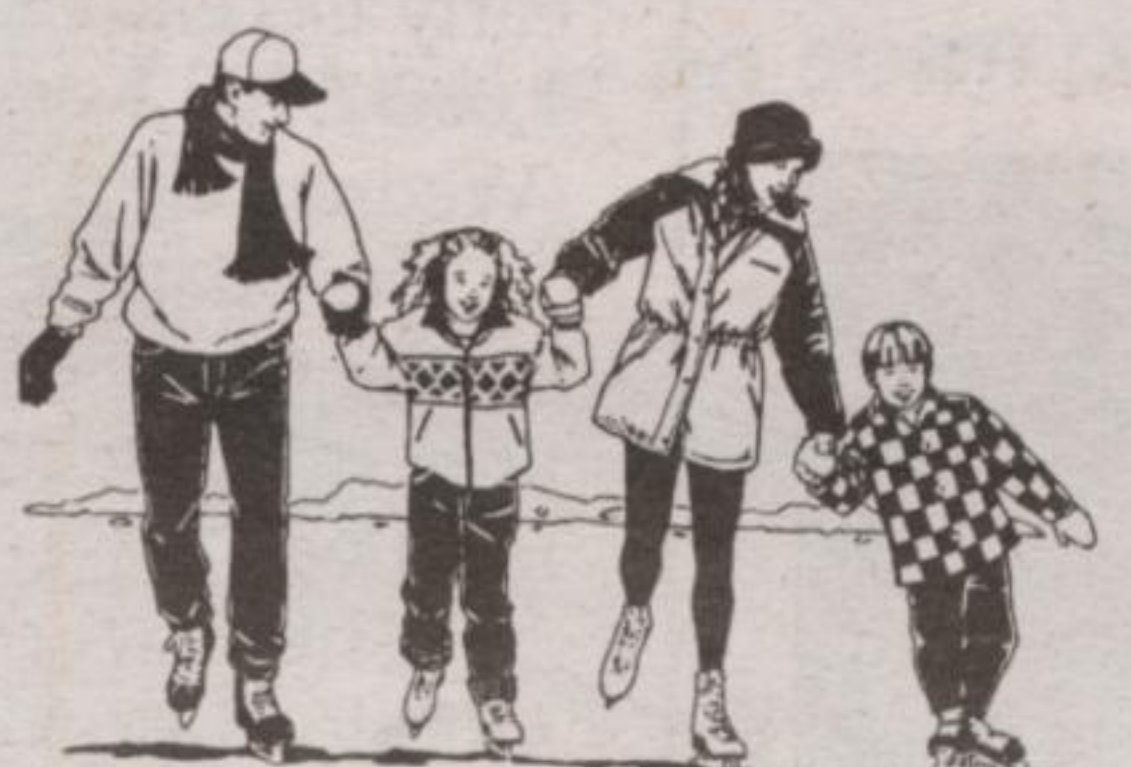
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Special education funding system should be scrapped, says Gardiner

The province's system for distributing special education funding should be scrapped, says Halton District School Board (HDSB) Chair Ethel Gardiner.

"We have to jump through hoops to serve the neediest kids," Gardiner said. "The funding formula should meet the needs of the children rather than the children having to meet the needs of the funding formula."

Gardiner is writing a letter on behalf of the board to the Ministry of Education and Training to express their concerns about the special education claim process.

However, Halton MPP Ted Chudleigh said the current system is working and provides accountability to taxpayers.

"If (school boards) claimed 10 kids when only eight do (require funding), it would be easy money," Chudleigh said. "We're just asking them to justify what they claim."

Under the current system, school boards must evaluate all children they feel should qualify for special education funding. The evaluation process consists of psychological, speech and behavioural assessments. The province then evaluates claims and sets funding according to the number of students and the level of need of those students. The province guaranteed funding levels through this year but next year the claims will be used to determine how much funding the board receives.

The Halton District School Board recently announced it spent an estimated \$575,644 processing 745 claims. Chudleigh said that figure seemed a little high, but Brenda Kearney, HDSB superintendent of student services, said other boards spent roughly the same. She said that money comes out the special education budget, rather than being spent on the children it is intended for.

Kearney said the short time frame boards are given to process claims also create problems. Once school boards receive the criteria from the province they have about five weeks to submit the claims. Kearney said a lot of that work has to be completed by special education teachers, which takes them out of the classroom.

"There's a huge amount of paperwork," she said. "It literally cripples the system for five to six weeks."

Kearney and special education supervisory officers from boards across the province assembled a discussion paper offering solutions to problems in the process and sent it to the ministry. She said it was favourably received and she is waiting to hear if a working group will be established.

One of the suggestions is that students be re-evaluated every three years instead of every year.

"Why should we have to submit the claim year after year if it has been approved?" Kearney asked.

Both Kearney and Gardiner see the need for a verification process. The HDSB had 76.2 per cent of its claims accepted, just above the provincial average. But under the claims process, the board expects its funding to be cut by \$1 million next year. It has received \$10 million in special education funding the last two years.

However, Gardiner said the onus for assessment should be on the province.

"The school boards could still identify children that require special education services," she said. "If (the province) wants to have a monitoring service, they're welcome to come to the class any time."

Chudleigh said boards are better equipped to handle the evaluation process.

Another of Gardiner's concerns is that because claims are submitted at the end of a school year to establish funding for the next year, any student who moves to a new board or joins the school system in Kindergarten or Junior Kindergarten has no funding allocated for them.

Marilyn Forster-Lo Turco of Acton, whose 10-year-old daughter Sara has Down's syndrome, said this causes stress at the beginning of each school year. Sara's evaluation requires her to have one-to-one Educational Assistant support. When Sara arrived for the first day of school at Robert Little Public School in Acton, she had only half-time support because there was a new student who also needed support.

"Every year we go through this," Forster-Lo Turco said. "(The board) has to do extra digging and rob Peter to pay Paul. They go fishing at other schools where (EAs) have been freed up."


Sara now has half-time support in the morning and one-on-one in the afternoon after the board shuffled its resources between schools. However, Forster-Lo Turco said Sara now deals with three to four different people in course of a day and the inconsistency between instructors will hinder her development.

"The goals for her learning this year, I don't expect her to meet them. That's nothing against the people working with her because they're great. They've just been handled an impossible task."

—By Herb Garbutt, staff writer



ETHEL GARDINER

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