

Stakeholder Summary

Special needs students: Improving pathways to higher education

Special education in Ontario and elsewhere is under intense scrutiny as calls for greater equity push schools toward more inclusive policies and practices, including those that improve the likelihood of special needs students pursuing postsecondary education (PSE).

While there have been a number of promising initiatives in Ontario to improve PSE access for the estimated 300,000 students in special education programs, relatively few high school students with special needs go to college or university, according to a new report commissioned by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario**.

Project Description

Special Needs Students and Transitions to Postsecondary Education utilized 2006 data from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) for its study of grade 11 and 12 special needs students – defined by the Ministry of Education as having a behaviour, communication, intellectual or physical disability, or multiple exceptionalities. The study considered a number of factors including family, achievement, engagement, self-assessment and post-high school pathways. The final report includes input from an expert panel of representatives from the Ministry of Education, school boards, colleges and universities, and the academic community, who discussed the findings and needed changes to current special education policies and practices. The study is one of several commissioned by HEQCO, which is preparing a summary of research to date in an upcoming @Issue paper.

Findings

The study found that 37 per cent of parents of special needs students had a university education, versus 54 per cent of non-special needs students. First-generation immigrant students had proportionately fewer special needs designations than third-generation or non-immigrant populations, although the authors note that many immigrant youth arrive in Canada as adolescents and enter the school system after elementary grades where most special needs services are initiated. The authors also note a high proportion of second-generation students with special needs, at 44 per cent.

Almost two-thirds of the TDSB sample of students with special needs are boys, according to the study. Twice as many students with special needs had marks below 60 per cent as compared to non-special needs students, while 7 per cent of students with special needs had marks above 80 per cent as compared to 30 per cent of non-special needs students.

Students with special needs rated their academic progress much less favourably, spent less time on homework and had less social engagement. A higher proportion of these students dropped out of high school or went directly into the workforce. The study found that only 18 per cent confirmed university acceptance as compared to 58 per cent of students without special needs. However, a higher proportion of students with special needs pursued community college.

Policy Implications

The expert panel identified transition planning as an important issue. Panelists noted the discrepancy between college and university enrolments among graduates with special needs, which some attributed to streaming or tracking practices in schools, where course selection can limit future access to PSE. The panel also identified a need to reconcile the different meanings of 'special needs' at the K-12 and PSE level, noting that differences in definitional requirements can lead to gaps in support services for students transitioning from high school to PSE.

The report acknowledges the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' Summer Transitions Program that assists students with learning disabilities in transitioning to PSE, and the work of the Regional Assessment Centres in counselling youth on PSE planning as important policy initiatives.

Special needs identification and support practices are becoming less reliant on a 'deficit' approach and instead are emphasizing individual 'strengths', the report concludes, resulting in a shift from reducing risk factors to mobilizing 'protective' factors that enhance children's resiliency, including a positive sense of self and a voice in deciding their own educational futures.

Further research would include an examination of extra-curricular program effects on school performance; the opportunities available to students with special needs in the Ontario apprenticeship system; a better understanding of the higher levels of participation of students with special needs in community colleges in contrast with their lower participation in universities; and the extent and success of college-to- university transfers among special needs students. The findings also point to important variations in how students with special needs receive support and instruction at the school and PSE levels. Additional research could compare differences in settings and consistency in student and teacher expectations. As the study focused on students who went directly from high school to PSE, future research might examine the more complex transition pathways of those who return to education after some years in the workforce.

Special Needs Students and Transitions to Postsecondary Education was written by Robert Sweet, Lakehead University; Paul Anisef, York University; Rob Brown, Toronto District School Board; Maria Adamuti-Trache, University of British Columbia; and Gillian Parekh, York University