

# Equitable Approaches to Supporting the Learning Needs of Neurodivergent Youth



EVIDENCE  
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief defines the term neurodivergent and summarizes three key messages and three equitable approaches to supporting the learning needs of neurodivergent youth.

## DEFINITION: NEURODIVERGENT

Coined by activist Kassiane Asasumasu, **neurodivergent** refers to individuals who process and learn information and function in ways that are not typical of most individuals.<sup>1</sup>

This term builds on *neurodiversity*, popularized by autistic sociologist Judy Singer in the 1990s. Neurodiversity provokes an intentional shift away from deficit-based language – such as “disorder” – and instead embraces the diversity of ways human brains process information.<sup>2</sup>

Neurodivergent encompasses a variety of diagnoses, such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dyslexia, Sensory Processing Disorder, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and more.

## SUPPORTING THE LEARNING NEEDS OF NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH: THREE KEY MESSAGES

Ontario youth have diverse learning and education needs that must be addressed to achieve equitable opportunities for learning and educational engagement.

For neurodivergent youth, traditional classroom environments and teaching strategies can be barriers to learning. Instead, educators must focus on the strengths and unique needs of these students to provide accessible learning opportunities, meaningful supports, and appropriate resources for both schools and families.

### 01. Education policy needs to change.

All students should have equal access to education and the supports to thrive in the classroom,<sup>3</sup> but Ontario’s education system has been critiqued for not providing what is needed for neurodivergent youth to succeed.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Inclusive education policies are inconsistently implemented across school boards, leading to some students being left out.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, the Ministry of Education regulates five types of educational support for neurodivergent learners – regular class with indirect support, regular class with resource assistance, regular class with withdrawal assistance, special education class with partial integration, and full-time special education<sup>7</sup> – but schools have been criticized by educators, parents/caregivers, and students for not offering all five accommodations due to limited resources. In another example, students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may or may not currently qualify for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), which can support students to navigate and complete

the standard curriculum. Instead, these criteria are left up to schools and school boards to determine, resulting in unequal access to critical supports.<sup>6,8</sup>

## **02. More funding is necessary for students with specialized education needs.**

While funding for special education programs has increased significantly in the last two decades in Ontario,<sup>2</sup> school board funding entitlements are based on a per-pupil, per-school, and per-board basis,<sup>2</sup> and is not enough to address the overwhelming need.<sup>4,5</sup>

After the COVID-19 pandemic, 91% of Ontario schools reported needing additional resources and support from the Ministry of Education for student mental health and wellbeing.<sup>9</sup> Across the province, there is a demonstrated need for increased special education funding as school boards spend more for special education than they are allotted.<sup>10,11</sup> Despite the need for additional resources and recommendations to increase the education budget, school board funding has actually been cut in recent years;<sup>10,11</sup> at the same time, there has been a push to increase limits on class sizes in elementary and secondary schools,<sup>12</sup> which “means less one-on-one support for each student and disproportionately impact[s] students with special needs.”<sup>13</sup>

A lack of resources is cited as the main reason some schools have failed to provide adequate programs and services outlined in their special education policies.<sup>4</sup> Since the pandemic, 82% of Ontario schools report needing additional resources for school support staff.<sup>9</sup> Parents have

reported “insufficient levels of staffing or services as the reason their children’s education needs were not being met,”<sup>5</sup> and 53.2% of parents of students with intellectual disabilities in Ontario reported that their child was “not receiving proper academic accommodations.”<sup>4</sup> Additional funding is required for schools to provide adequate supports in the classroom,<sup>4</sup> including additional teacher support and training.

**More funding is not only required in the education system, but also for health care services:** long wait lists for professional assessments of young people with specialized learning needs have resulted in delayed supports for these youth.<sup>4</sup> Youth and families in Northern communities can find it especially difficult to access the assessments required for specialized education supports.<sup>5</sup>

## **03. Strengths based approaches are critical for student success.**

Neurodivergent youth may struggle with self-confidence due to ongoing stigma surrounding neurodiversity and disability<sup>14</sup> that negatively impact their academic performance. Currently, students’ needs are most often assessed based on the skills and knowledge they lack rather than the strengths they bring to schools and program spaces.<sup>15</sup> Evaluation of students’ unique education needs should be based on their strengths<sup>15,16,17</sup> to cultivate positive environments that build up young people’s confidence and ability to thrive, both in and outside the classroom.

## SUPPORTING THE LEARNING NEEDS OF NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH: THREE EQUITABLE PRACTICES

### 01. Identify each young person's needs and strengths.

Inclusive education requires:

- a. the absolute belief that every student has the potential to succeed;
- b. removing barriers to learning for students; and
- c. increasing access to strategies, resources, and equitable approaches for educators and school personnel to support neurodivergent youth.<sup>7</sup>

Inclusion is not one-size-fits-all neurodivergent youth have diverse learning needs, so inclusion must be tailored to individual learning needs and understood as an ongoing process.<sup>15</sup>

To achieve authentic inclusion of neurodivergent youth, each young person's individual strengths should be identified and supported.<sup>16,17</sup> The language used to describe and support these strengths and the overall learning environment must be affirming and supportive for all students to thrive.<sup>15</sup> One way to increase accessibility is to focus on building strong teacher-student relationships that foster student trust in the educator's belief in their ability to succeed.<sup>15</sup>

The process of identifying strengths and needs can be resource intensive, so educators and other practitioners must be provided additional resources as necessary – including funds, staff, and appropriate referrals – to achieve truly inclusive learning environments.

### 02. Facilitate the navigation of funding supports and opportunities – and advocate for increased funding.

Parents and families of neurodivergent youth require greater access to funding for their children to receive the individualized supports they need to thrive.<sup>5</sup> Although individualized education and health care funding are inadequate to fully meet the needs of neurodivergent youth in Ontario, those funding opportunities that do exist are also challenging to navigate and access.<sup>5</sup> Families can be supported through informed systems navigation and referrals.

Educators and other practitioners can be prepared to facilitate transparency about what funding and supports are available for children and youth to ensure more equal learning opportunities. They can also contribute to advocacy campaigns and initiatives calling for increased funding, using their experience and positions within the sector to amplify the need and the voices of neurodivergent youth and their families.

### 03. Engage neurodivergent youth and their families in shaping education policy – and in program design, development, and evaluation.

In Canada, evidence has linked the labelling of and insufficient resources for neurodivergent students with school disruption and even school discontinuation.<sup>14</sup> These students need to be proactively and meaningfully engaged in the education system to inform the development and delivery of accessible and equitable learning opportunities. Advocates have called for greater engagement of youth with special education needs and their families to understand the supports required for these youth to thrive.<sup>5</sup>

Neurodivergent youth should be recognized as experts in the current education landscape and involved in crafting policy to best address their individual and community-specific needs.<sup>14</sup> Programs facilitating learning opportunities for neurodivergent youth should similarly ensure that these young people are included in the design, development, and evaluation of initiatives.

All educational and support programs should also engage the families of neurodivergent youth to promote holistic supports for young people.<sup>17</sup> Families of neurodivergent youth may offer insight into the challenges of accessing equitable learning supports, as well as solutions at the program, school, and policy levels that could effectively advance their children's learning successes and wellbeing.<sup>14</sup>

#### HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "neurodivergent AND education," "autism AND education AND Ontario," "ADHD AND education AND Ontario," and "learning disabilities AND education AND Ontario".

## ENDNOTES

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