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CRISIS IN THE CLASSROOM

Exclusion, Seclusion, and Restraint of Students
with Disabilities in Ontario Schools



About Community Living Ontario

Community Living Ontario advocates with people who have an intellectual disability, their families, and member organizations to create inclusive communities across Ontario. We envision an Ontario where everyone belongs, is valued, and has the freedom to live the life they choose.

About this report

Crisis in the Classroom provides an analysis of the Ontario School Inclusion Survey, which asked parents and other caregivers of students with disabilities to answer a series of questions about their children's experiences in Ontario's education system. The survey builds on similar studies previously implemented in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec. *Crisis in the Classroom* also makes a series of recommendations that, if implemented, will improve inclusion, belonging, and educational achievement among students with disabilities.

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Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of Community Living Ontario.

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Executive Summary

In 2023, Community Living Ontario partnered with Jess Whitley, Professor at the University of Ottawa Faculty of Education, to understand students with disabilities' experience of exclusion, seclusion and restraint in Ontario schools. **The findings from more than 500 respondents are highly concerning:**

- 29% of caregivers reported that their child had been secluded in school, i.e., placed in a separate space away from their peers, often behind locked or blocked doors.
- 14% of caregivers reported that their child had been restrained in school, including being held down on the ground, held while standing, and held while being forced to walk.
- Students living in households with lower parental education and income levels were at increased risk for both seclusion and restraint.
- A large percentage of respondents reported experiences of exclusion:
 - One in five students were attending school on a part-time or modified schedule.
 - 31% of students had been sent home or instructed to stay home because the school was unable to meet their needs.
 - More than half of caregivers reported that their children were 'sometimes,' 'often,' or 'always' excluded from academic events and opportunities.
 - One in four students represented in the survey 'rarely' or 'never' enjoy school or feel valued or accepted by school staff.
 - 40% of students avoided school or were reluctant to attend because of anxiety and fear caused by their experiences within the school community.

Our findings add to a growing body of research on exclusion, seclusion and restraint of students with disabilities in Canadian schools, following similar studies in British Columbia, Alberta,

Manitoba, and Quebec. Our report brings attention to the need for urgent action to ensure that students with disabilities are protected, supported, and fully included in the lives of their schools and communities. Specifically, we are calling on the Government of Ontario to:

1. **Increase access to appropriate and adequate staffing and other supports for students;**
2. **Increase access to trauma-informed training for educational staff and administrators;**
3. **Implement clear provincial regulation and policy re: exclusion and partial-day attendance;**
4. **Implement clear provincial regulation and policy re: seclusion and restraint;**
5. **Require schools, school boards, and the Ministry of Education to track and report on the use of seclusion, restraint, exclusion, and partial-day attendance.**

As it stands, students with disabilities do not have access to the level of staffing and other support they need to succeed. Too often, school staff do not know how to respond to their needs in a positive and safe way. There is little or no provincial guidance on the serious issues of seclusion, restraint, and school exclusion, and no provincial data that would allow us to know if these issues are getting better or worse. School boards have been forced to create their own policies, and principals are implementing those policies in different ways. It is time for the provincial government to turn its attention to these problems, to bring a cohesive approach to addressing them, and to prioritize the well-being of students with disabilities.

Key Quotes From Survey Respondents

“My son has spent a lot of time in a padded room within his school. I was not aware of this room initially until I picked him up earlier in the year while he was in there. Not a great experience as a parent. He is in this room daily due to behaviors and emotional dysregulation. The staff are not trained well at all in supporting children with behavioral issues and trauma. My son continues to be retraumatized at school and does not feel safe there.”

“In grade 1, my child was dragged across the school by educational assistants and came home with bruises in the shape of handprints on his arms.”

“100% of the reason my child ever needs to be excluded or secluded is because they don't have enough staff/resources/time to adequately accommodate his needs... It has become increasingly common as he gets older.”

“Insufficient staff and overwhelmed teachers limit the opportunities for inclusion. Lack of education for the rest of the students in the school promotes exclusion. My child feels overwhelmed and not listened to a lot in the school environment and as a result, excluded.”

“There is not enough training amongst the staff for them to understand how to help/teach a person with autism. My child has a right to an education as much as a neurotypical child does.”

“My child has been restrained and secluded in past years, this was not communicated by the school until I asked. I had to hear it from members of the community who recognized my child and contacted me with what they had seen. No matter how much we make efforts to communicate, we don't necessarily trust that this has not continued.”

“It has taken many years of advocacy, but our son has 1:1 EA support and attends regular grade 11 classes (a mix of university prep, college, and open). He has multiple seizures per day and is visually impaired. Some teachers are better than others at accommodating but our son belongs with his peers. His disability and support needs are greater than many students in segregated programming. This shows me that students with complex needs can have rich, fully inclusive education experiences.”

Introduction: Stories of the Seclusion, Restraint, and Exclusion of Students with Disabilities

On a regular basis, news outlets publish stories about Ontario students with disabilities who have been excluded, physically restrained, forcibly moved, and/or involuntarily isolated in a room at their school. For example:

- An autistic grade 1 student, who had limited hearing and verbal communication capacity, was repeatedly locked in a padded room in 2021, without his parents being notified. The seclusion room was located within a segregated classroom for autistic students.*
- A 10 year old boy with Cerebral Palsy was injured when he was forcibly removed from a classroom, strapped to a chair, and left on his own in 2018. His parents discovered a pattern of restraint and seclusion only after months of incidents that went undocumented and unreported by school staff.
- An 11 year old girl was repeatedly held down on the floor by school staff in 2017, which on one occasion resulted in bruising and burst blood vessels in her eyes and cheeks. School records indicated that physical restraint was part of the student's safety plan, and she was regularly restrained by a group of teachers.
- School staff called police to control the behaviour of a 6 year old Black student with disabilities in 2016. According to court records, the student was held down on the ground by police, had her wrists and ankles cuffed, and was left restrained for almost thirty minutes. On previous occasions, this student had been repeatedly restrained by staff using a 'child lock hold.'
- An autistic youth was repeatedly removed from his classroom and isolated in a separate room the size of a small closet in 2012, with staff physically blocking the door for long periods of time. This student experienced both seclusion and restraint in multiple schools, including staff forcing his arms behind his back in a chair as early as kindergarten.

**Following the guidance of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and A4A Ontario, this report uses identity-first language when discussing autism, e.g., 'autistic students.'*

As recently as June 2024, 16-year-old Landyn Ferris died while apparently sleeping unsupervised in his high school's 'sensory room.' In the wake of his tragic death, the province's Minister of Education stated that "all parties will work together to ensure this tragedy does not happen again," adding that this work is "the sombre obligation we will fulfill for this child and every child in this province."

There is also growing public attention to the exclusion of students with disabilities from schools. Media outlets including the Globe and Mail and Ottawa Citizen have covered stories of students who, while having been neither suspended nor expelled, are consistently sent home early, told to stay home, or attend school on a part-time basis. And while all publicly-funded school boards must submit annual reports of official suspensions and expulsions to the Ministry of Education, the full extent of exclusions is unreported and unknown.

Previous Canadian Studies on the Seclusion, Restraint and Exclusion of Students with Disabilities

Recent Canadian studies strongly suggest that seclusion, restraint, and exclusion are disturbingly common across the country.

In 2019, Autism Advocacy Ontario published the results of a survey of 568 special education students and their caregivers:

- 16% of respondents reported students being secluded in a separate room or space that was either locked or physically barred by an education worker. Of these:
 - 73% were secluded more than six times.
 - 57% were forcibly moved to the seclusion room and/or physically restrained while in the room.
 - 50% indicated at least one instance of seclusion where the caregiver was not notified.
- 23% of respondents reported that their child had been physically restrained. Of these:
 - 66% of students had been restrained more than six times.
 - 35% of caregivers reported not being told of restraint use.

In 2023, the **Quebec** Association for Intellectual Disability surveyed 338 caregivers of students with disabilities, and reported that 34% of respondents had a child who had been sent to a seclusion room. For 43% this happened a few times per week, and for 22% a few times per day.

In 2018, an Inclusion **Alberta** survey of 389 caregivers of students with disabilities found that more than half had experienced seclusion and/or restraint. In eighty percent of cases, the students were between the ages of five and ten years.

Inclusion **British Columbia** performed similar surveys in 2013 and 2017, with comparable

findings of seclusion and restraint. In both years, more than half of respondents reported prolonged and repeated use of physical isolation and restraint.

In 2019, researchers surveyed sixty-four parents of **Manitoba** students who had all experienced restraint and/or seclusion. About half had experienced restraint, and half had experienced seclusion in the previous three years. As in other studies on this issue, the majority were under age ten, and many reported pervasive use of restraint throughout their school careers.

Unfortunately, less is known about the informal exclusion of students with disabilities from schools. Despite growing attention to and concern about students being excluded, Ontario Ministry of Education data is incomplete, inconsistent, and often unpublished. In June 2024, People for Education reported that the proportion of principals instructing students with disabilities to stay home has increased steadily since 2013, and that this is much more common in schools that experience shortages of educational assistants. Approximately 60% of principals in Ontario reported having students with disabilities stay home because their support needs could not be met.^[1]

The Ontario School Inclusion Survey, 2023

The Ontario School Inclusion Survey asked parents, guardians, family members, and other caregivers of school-aged students with disabilities and/or special educational needs about their experiences with inclusion, exclusion, seclusion, and restraint at school. The survey was active in June and July of 2023, and asked respondents about students' experiences in the 2022-2023 school year.

The information reported below includes information from 541 caregivers of students with disabilities and/or special educational needs.

It is important to note that, while the studies were similar in scope, our findings cannot be compared to those of [Autism Advocacy Ontario](#) from 2019 (discussed above). Neither study is necessarily representative of the full population of special education students in Ontario, and the studies also differ in several ways. Both are important in understanding the experiences of students with disabilities in the province.

Information on the demographics of students and caregivers who completed the survey is provided in Appendix A.

(1) Students' Experiences of Seclusion

The term 'seclusion' was defined in the Ontario School Inclusion Survey as "being put in an isolated area for a long period of time and not being allowed to leave the area." In Ontario's school system, commonly-used terms include 'isolation,' 'time out,' 'alone time,' 'quiet time,' 'calming rooms' and 'alternative learning environments.' When students are secluded, they do not have the choice to come and go from the area or room.

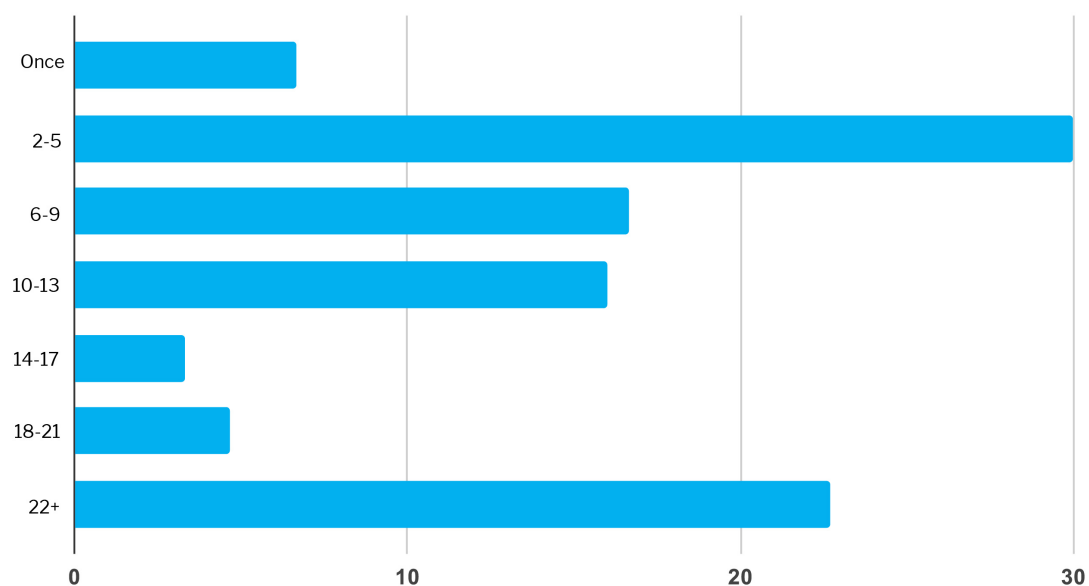
Twenty-nine percent (n = 155) of survey respondents reported seclusion being used on their child in the 2022-2023 school year. Of the students who had been secluded:

- 7% were secluded once
- 47% were secluded between 2 and 9 times
- 24% were secluded between 10 and 21 times
- 23% were secluded over 22 times^[2]

Nearly half of students who had been secluded experienced this more than ten times.

In other words, nearly half of students who had been secluded experienced this more than ten times, i.e., on a regular basis.

Number of times student was secluded (%)



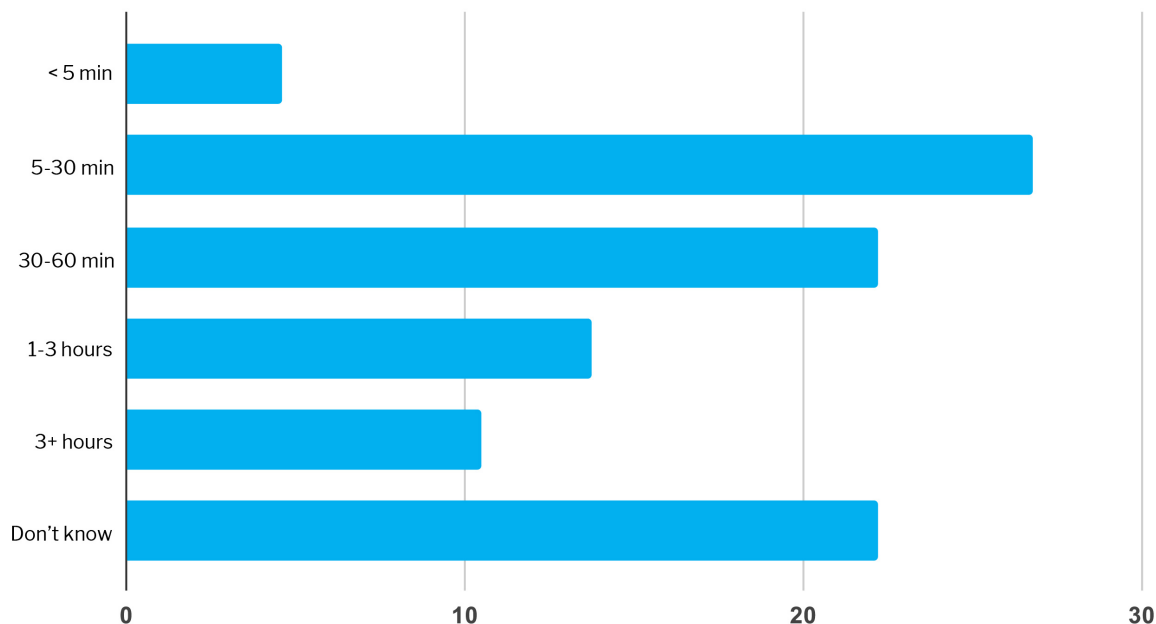
The most common reported types of seclusion were having a locked/blocked door (n = 83), and being physically prevented from leaving (n = 25).

Respondents were able to provide additional information for this question, and some of the detailed responses broadened our perspective of what seclusion and isolation look like. Specifically, in 24% of cases of seclusion (n = 40), caregivers indicated that students had been taken or directed to go to a separate space and told not to leave. While on its face this does not seem as serious as being locked or blocked in a room, it touches on the uneven power dynamic and sometimes coercive nature of teacher-student relationships.

In a small number of cases, caregivers indicated that their child had made a decision to go to a different room of their own accord. These cases were not counted as seclusion.

The longest amount of time students spent in seclusion varied, as shown in the chart below. The most commonly reported time spans were five to thirty minutes (27%) and 30 to 60 minutes (22%), with an additional 22% not knowing. One in four (24%) spent more than an hour in seclusion, and more than 10% were secluded for three hours or longer.

Longest amount of time spent in seclusion (%)



Caregivers reported being told first about the seclusion by their child (28%), followed by the principal (20%), an Educational Assistant (16%), the classroom teacher (15%), and a range of other school staff.

Of the 155 students who were secluded, 14% experienced physical injury or pain and 59% experienced emotional trauma or distress.

Caregivers were unaware of who put the seclusions in place 21% of the time. Twenty percent indicated the principal, 20% the classroom teacher, and 18% a special education/resource teacher as the individual leading or enforcing the seclusion.

More than half of caregivers had not given permission for seclusion to be used on their child.

Students were significantly more likely to be secluded:

- If their family had a lower level of education;
- If they were identified with a behaviour identification or a mild intellectual disability;
- If they were in a special education class full-time;
- If they were younger.

59% of students who had been secluded experienced emotional trauma or distress.

Direct Quotes from Caregivers

“Last year his teacher told us he was isolated regularly, without any description of the area. We asked and were eventually shown a quiet area. We do know however that our child was so afraid of his teacher that he refused to get off the bus every morning. He was self harming in his sleep every school night. When addressed with the school, no information was given except that they would be changing his teacher.”

“My son has spent a lot of time in a padded room within his school. I was not aware of this room initially until I picked him up earlier in the year while he was in there.”

“Put in a room with staff holding door shut.”

“Locked in a padded room.”

“My daughter was previously moved physically off the yard and into the ‘resource room’ which is a small walk-in closet room with a crash pad.”

“The public school here has a secret padded restraint room. I do not feel comfortable with my child attending this school after a very poor 13 day experience.”

(2) The Use of Restraint on Students

The term ‘restraint’ was defined in the Ontario School Inclusion Survey as “people physically stopping a student from being able to move. So for example someone holding a student in a chair and not letting them move away.”

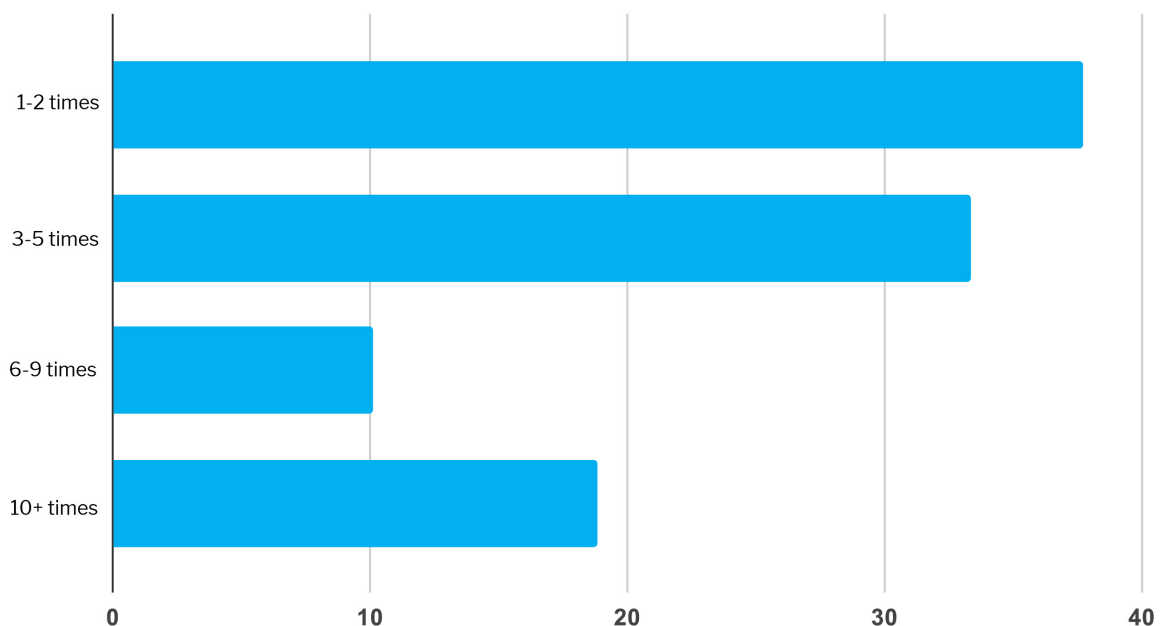
Fourteen percent (n = 74) of caregivers reported that their child had been restrained while in school during the 2022-2023 school year.

Students who were restrained experienced this an average of 4.5 times in the school year. Among students who were restrained:

- 38% were restrained one or two times;
- 33% were restrained between three and five times;
- 29% were restrained more than six times, with 19% being restrained 10 times or more.

Nearly 20% of students who were restrained experienced this ten times or more.

Number of times student was restrained (%)



The most common types of restraints were:

- Held in a standing position (n = 27)
- Held while being forced to walk (n = 25)
- Held down on the floor (n = 20)
- Picked up and carried (n = 19)
- Held in a seated position/on a chair (n = 18)

Restraint was most often performed by educational assistants or child & youth workers (41%), special education/resource teachers (20%), and classroom teachers (19%).

The incidence of restraint was more common among younger students:

- 18% of students aged 10 and younger in the survey had been restrained;
- 10% of students aged 11 and older had been restrained.

Reports of restraint came from across the province, with at least one report in the grand majority of boards and authorities. Restraint was also reported in all classroom placements, as shown in Table 1 on the following page.

Forty percent of caregivers reported that they had not been contacted by the school after instances of restraint. More than a quarter reported first hearing of the restraint from their child. Ten percent first learned of it from another child (8%) or another parent (2%).

Parents and caregivers have the ability to give permission for restraint to be used for their children, for example as part of their IEP or Student Safety Plan. However, in half of cases caregivers had not given permission for restraint to be used.

Table 1: Use of Restraint in Different Classroom Placements

Class placement	Child was restrained at school during 2022-23 school year?	
	Yes	No
In a special education school all of the time	4	24
	14.3%	85.7%
In a special education class all of the time	14	75
	15.7%	84.3%
In special education class(es) most of the time (more than half the day, but at least one period in a regular class)	10	34
	22.7%	77.3%
In regular class(es) at times and special education class(es) at times (one period or more but less than half the day)	11	43
	20.4%	79.6%
In regular class(es) full time with support from special education or resource staff	24	151
	13.7%	86.3%
In regular class(es) full time with support from the teacher(s) if necessary	11	139
	7.3%	92.7%
Total	74	466
	13.7%	86.3%

Forty percent of caregivers had not been contacted by the school after instances of restraint. In half of cases, caregivers had not given permission for restraint to be used.

Direct Quotes from Caregivers

“School staff have no training on how to work with children/youth who have suffered trauma and it shows when they try to impose discipline on a child in the midst of a mental health episode where the child is in fight or flight mode.”

“Strapped into an adaptive stroller and closed in a darkened room alone.”

“Disabled his power wheelchair.”

“Prior uses of restraint at school, small child hold etc. Used to be placed in a converted storage area as a ‘safe’ place.”

“BMS restraint used to secure child in seated position on floor.”*

“I have asked my board for transparency and accountability here as there is no policy or procedure around restraint, seclusion or exclusion. It has been almost a full school year with no progress on that policy. At various times in the year, different people have denied aspects of my child’s restraint, seclusion and exclusion. We have never been given written documentation despite asking repeatedly. My child was deeply, deeply traumatized by restraint and seclusion.”

**BMS = Behaviour Management Systems, a staff training program developed by the Ontario Education Services Corporation in cooperation with the Ontario Ministry of Education.*

(3) Exclusion: Modified schedules, shortened days, and missed days

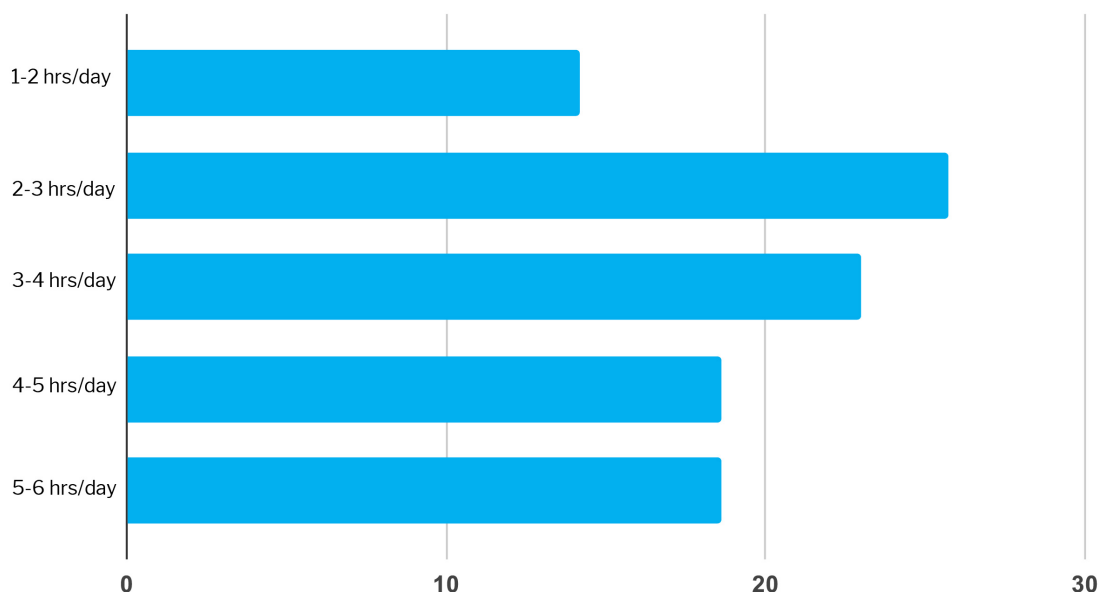
The Ontario School Inclusion Survey captured students' experiences of exclusion from school (including both formal and informal exclusions enforced by principals) as well as information on their feelings and experiences of belonging within their school communities.

One in five students attended school on a part-time basis

Of the 541 caregivers who responded to the survey, 21% indicated that their child attended school on a modified schedule. In other words, their child was being educated on a part-time basis. The number of hours attended are summarized in the chart below.

- The most common modified schedule, reported for more than one-quarter of students, was between two and three hours per day;
- Nearly 15% of students on a modified schedule reported attending school for less than two hours per day;
- Sixty-three percent of students on modified days attended school for less than four hours per day.

Average hours attended, students on a modified schedule (%)



63% of students on modified schedules attended school for less than four hours per day.

For 38% of students on a modified schedule, this had been in place for the full school year. For another 32%, it had been in place for five months or more; for 18% three to five months, and for 13% one to two months.

Caregivers were able to provide more detailed information on why their child attended school on a part-time or modified schedule. Of the 90 caregivers who offered such information:

- 38% mentioned a lack of adequate in-school support for their child.
- 18% mentioned the school's inability to prevent or effectively manage their child's challenging behaviours. The majority of these respondents mentioned both behavioural needs and a lack of in-school support.
- 10% mentioned frequent therapy appointments or alternative learning arrangements.

Direct Quotes from Caregivers

“They said the school has no funding to keep him full day.”

“We withdrew our child from school for half of grade 6, all of grade 7 and re-registered him in April of grade 8. For grade 9 they would not provide him with the support he needed so he was registered for two classes and ended up dropping one.”

“Too stressful to be at school all day. Difficult to attend all day long due to fatigue and sometimes has to leave for therapy. Or wants to come home because she does not belong.”

“Difficulty regulating emotions, sensory sensitivity, staff don't know how to handle him. Has major meltdowns and they don't know what to do.”

“The staff in her ISP program could not handle her ‘behaviour’ or help her with her challenges.”

“Staff were uncomfortable as his symptoms become severe due to lack of support. Was initially asked not to return. After hospital and community supports advocated for 2 months, the part time schedule was implemented.”

Missed time at school is a pervasive problem for students with disabilities

Apart from the issue of modified schedules, caregivers were also asked about the reasons why students missed school even when they were scheduled to attend. These reasons are provided in the table below (note that, for this question, survey respondents were able to choose multiple responses).

Table 2 – All reasons for missing school	#	%
Caregiver gave student a day off (to give child a rest)	259	48
Student was reluctant/avoided school (anxiety, fear, etc.)	220	41
Caregiver's decision - school not able to meet student's needs	155	29
School sent student home, citing behaviour issues	132	24
Other reasons (e.g., sickness, appointments, etc.)	118	22
School instructed/asked student to not attend	94	17
School sent student home because of lack of staff or resources	75	14

31% of survey respondents reported that their child had been sent home or instructed to stay home because of a lack of resources, the school's inability to manage behaviour, or other reasons.

Sixty-five percent of survey respondents indicated that their child had avoided school and/or been given a day off by their caregiver at some point. Even among students who were already on a modified schedule, 62% had avoided school or been given a day off.

Thirty-one percent of survey respondents reported that their child had been sent home or instructed to stay home because of a lack of resources, the school's inability to manage

behaviour, or other reasons. This figure increased to 59% among students attending school on a modified schedule.

Nearly one in five students represented in the survey missed more than one full day of school per week. An additional 51% missed two or three days of school every month. Based on Ontario regulations, caregiver responses indicate that close to half of our sample meet the criteria for chronic absenteeism, i.e., missing 10% or more of school days.

In their written feedback, caregivers consistently reported that a lack of resources and support was causing pervasive stress, anxiety, and isolation for their children.

Direct Quotes from Caregivers

“Insufficient staff and overwhelmed teachers limit the opportunities for inclusion. Lack of education for the rest of the students in the school promote exclusion. My child feels overwhelmed and not listened to a lot in the school environment and as a result, excluded.”

“My child went through K-6 with no EA support, teachers can only provide so much one-on-one with 25-40 kids in a mainstream class.”

“For my daughter, to be fully included, she requires a full-time EA to keep her focused on work. This has always been denied to her, even with her psychological evaluation which states this is what is needed for her to succeed and reach her full potential.”

“She often needs to stay home to take a break to be able to continue. She also doesn't feel she can go to a staff to talk when her cup is full and instead calls home to be listened to so that she can cope through the rest of the day. Exclusion based on lack of resources.”

“The school was making my son eat on the floor alone in the hall. The rest of his day was excluded in a room on an iPad mostly unsupervised where he was able to access scary or inappropriate content. I found out about this after it had all been going on a while as he has communication challenges.”

“My child has been staying in for recess for at least 3 years due to being bullied and not feeling safe during the break times... Bullied basically every day and a lot of the time the teacher/school turns a blind eye.”

Students were significantly more likely to miss school if their family had a lower level of education, if their family had a lower income level, and if they had a lower sense of belonging (as reported by caregivers).

Caregivers were also asked to choose the one reason that best described, most of the time, why their child missed school (apart and aside from modified schedules). The results for this question are presented in the table below.

Table 3 - Main reason for missing school	#	%
Student was reluctant/avoided school (anxiety, fear, etc.)	115	23
Caregiver gave student a day off (to give child a rest)	104	21
Other reasons (e.g., sickness, appointments, etc.)	88	18
School sent student home, citing behaviour issues	59	12
Caregiver's decision - school not able to meet student's needs	54	11
School sent student home because of lack of staff or resources	42	9
School instructed/asked student to not attend	32	6

In more than one-quarter of cases, school instruction to go or stay home was the reason that most accounted for students' absences. An additional quarter were mainly explained by the student avoiding school, and another 20% came from caregivers giving students a day off.

The underlying issues of (1) a lack of support and (2) a lack of belonging, along with the behavioural effects of these issues, are threaded throughout these findings, and were prominent in direct quotes from caregivers.

Direct Quotes from Caregivers

"100% of the reason my child ever needs to be excluded or secluded is because they don't have enough staff/resources/time to adequately accommodate his needs... It has become increasingly common as he gets older."

"My child is not accepted in normal classes. Called 'sped' or 'LAC girl,' never by name. My daughter has severe anxiety and classmates in normal class never engaged with her and she never made any friends. It was like she had the plague and some took her anxiety and mutism as something funny."

"A severe lack of dedicated support staff and large class sizes make the public education system a highly stressful place for children with special needs and difficult to be as successful as they can be. It's also challenging for those who need support and encouragement with engaging socially, thereby inhibiting a sense of community/ belonging."

"Staff do not have the proper level of special education skills. His current teacher was a grade 11 English teacher and now teaches a Developmental Disability Intensive Support Program and lacks skills and experience. His behaviour this year has been explosive but all fingers point to my son, not to the antecedents or to the skill of the staff."

"Ability to cope/behaviours/self-injurious behaviours increase as he tires. He leaves 45 minutes early every day."

"No Educational Assistant support leading to school anxiety and refusal."

"Bullying is dismissed until it becomes physical. No discipline measures to stop even though a protocol in place. Unfair when a child's anxiety and fear cause avoidance and absence."

"I am constantly getting phone calls to pick my child up early because their behaviour 'isn't safe.' I also had to keep him home for four days so they could develop a safety and behaviour plan. And now he can only go to school in the mornings... I've requested multiple meetings, arranged to pay to have professional help come into the school and the school wouldn't do it. Their constant answer is me to constantly pick up my child when his behaviour is too much for them to handle."

Many students lack a feeling of belonging at school

Given the kinds of experiences mentioned above, it is not surprising that a substantial proportion of caregivers indicated that their children do not feel that they belong or are valued in their schools:

- 27% rarely or never enjoy attending school;
- 24% rarely or never feel valued by school staff;
- 30% rarely or never feel accepted by their peers;
- 22% are often or always excluded from academic events or opportunities;
- 22% are often or always excluded from extra-curricular or social events.

Direct Quotes from Caregivers

“Her biggest sadness comes from peer exclusion and friendship doesn't come easily for or to her.”

“If he wanted to attend any field trip I had to attend with him as they didn't feel like they could manage him without assistance.”

“Multiple adults failed my son. His previous teachers were mostly wonderful and caring. This past year's [teacher] clearly disliked my son and had no empathy or understanding of autism.”

“My son is welcomed by staff and students but due to his lack of speech and delays his interactions with classmates are superficial and result in him often being left on the sidelines. Interaction needs a lot of support.”

“This type of schooling has had a tremendous impact on his mental health. He feels unworthy, unwanted and disposable.”

(4) Discussion

Data from the 2023 Ontario School Inclusion Survey unequivocally confirms the following:

- Student with disabilities are being forcibly secluded in a variety of ways.
- Students with disabilities are being physically restrained by educational staff.
- Students with disabilities are being excluded *within* their school communities, and they are being excluded *from* their school communities.

The data presented in this report, along with the additional information and context provided by caregivers, offers overwhelming evidence that change is urgently needed in Ontario's school system. To understand the kinds of changes that are needed, it is important to understand the wider context as well as what has been recommended in other jurisdictions.

Perspectives from other provinces

The findings of the 2023 Ontario School Inclusion Survey are broadly in line with previous Canadian studies on the exclusion, restraint, and seclusion of students with disabilities. In light of the evidence, previous reports have called for a range of responses. For example, Inclusion British Columbia stated:

“BC educators want to provide safe, inclusive and supportive classrooms that welcome all students. Most do excellent work, most of the time, despite challenging systemic gaps. However, our investigation showed too many BC students are still being injured and traumatized by abusive, inappropriate and outdated practices. Reasons include a lack of regulatory oversight, unclear standards, acceptance of aversive practices and inadequate supports and training.”^[3]

Inclusion Alberta wrote:

“No parent should have to continue to live in fear, every day their child is in school that they might be isolated, locked up, restrained or otherwise punished because they happen to have

a disability. Nor should any parent ever again have to feel coerced into agreeing to their child's seclusion or restraint in order to have their child educated, which is supposed to be a legal and human right in Alberta.”^[4]

While calling for the “implementation of regulatory standards, legitimizing the voice of parents of children and youth with disabilities, and training for educators in positive behaviour interventions” in Manitoba, researchers Nadine Bartlett and Taylor Ellis stated that:

“... restraint and seclusion are being misused as behaviour management techniques, especially with students with disabilities. These practices contravene Canada's commitment to international standards regarding the rights of children and youth with disabilities, and change is required.”^[5]

Lastly, the Quebec Association for Intellectual Disability highlighted:

“... a critical need for educational policies to be reviewed with a view to developing clear and consistent protocols for the use of behaviour management and support measures. It is essential to take into consideration alternative practices and positive approaches that meet the specific needs of children living with a disability and/or diverse educational and social needs, while promoting their inclusion in the school environment.”^[6]

Previous studies have made the following recommendations:

- Increase access to appropriate and adequate supports for students, including Educational Assistants (EAs), Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), special education teachers, and other professional staff.
- Provide education and training for teachers, other instructional and support staff, and school administrators on methods of preventing situations where exclusion, restraint, or seclusion are felt to be a necessary response.
- Create clear and enforceable provincial regulations and policy re: exclusion, seclusion, and restraint.

- Eliminate or comprehensively limit the use of exclusionary measures, seclusion and restraint in schools.
- Require the documentation and reporting of all instances of exclusion, seclusion, and restraint, including public reporting at the provincial level.

Perspectives from educators and the media

Teachers' unions regularly report that there has been an increase in violence by students against teachers. Students with disabilities are often singled out in these communications. For example, in 2023 the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) reported findings that nearly 80% of its members experienced or witnessed student-initiated violence against a staff member, rising to nearly 90% among special educational staff.

While it is not always stated outright, information is often presented in a way that suggests students with developmental disabilities are a key source of violence against teachers. For example, ETFO has written that:

- "Eighty-six percent of ETFO members who work in special education have personally experienced violence or witnessed it against another staff person."
- "Calming spaces," "specialized classes," educational assistants, and behavioural specialists are often not accessible and have decreased in availability.^[7]

In a media release, ETFO stated:

"It's clear that many school spaces are not safe, especially for those working on the front lines with students whose needs are not being met... Students who are struggling, and especially students with special education needs, have been chronically under-served by the government. School boards are not getting adequate funding to ensure students get access to early assessments and front-line support workers. There is a critical need for more educational assistants, special education teachers, psychologists, behavioural therapists, school support counsellors, child and youth workers and speech-language pathologists to meet the promise of an inclusive education system."^[8]

While ETFO acknowledges that all behaviour is influenced by context, media coverage of violence in schools often takes the side of educational staff, and has an unfortunate habit of conflating disability with aggressive behaviour. Students with disabilities are frequently blamed. For example, here is the [Globe and Mail](#) in May 2023:

“Advocates for inclusive education argue that children do better academically and socially in a regular classroom and that their classmates benefit as well. But many parents and educators think money is the real issue and are concerned that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not properly supported in mainstream spaces, where teachers already have a full class, and that can lead to disruptions, violent incidents and suspensions.”

“At the heart of the issue lie fundamental questions about what equity in schools looks like for children with complex needs and how to balance the right to an education for students with intellectual or behavioural issues with the need to keep them, other students and teachers safe.”

From the [Globe and Mail](#) again, in September 2019:

“While the number of reported incidents is increasing, gaps in the data make it difficult to determine which types of incidents are most frequent, why they’re occurring and the characteristics of the students involved... But in interviews with The Globe, board administrators and educators cited a handful of factors, including mental-health issues, child poverty and the integration of special-needs students with complex behavioural issues into mainstream classrooms.”

“Over the past few decades – and as a result of shifts in thinking combined with lobbying from parents and advocacy groups – schools began integrating more of these children in regular classrooms, rather than segregating them in separate schools or rooms. Teaching assistants are nothing more than safety monitors now... as they attend to one crisis after another.”

An example from Bradford Today in March 2019:

“Violence is... something our children and educators face every day in our classrooms... It is becoming all too common and involves children with behavioural challenges who are biting, scratching, spitting, kicking, punching, using violence with scissors and chairs, and other actions against teachers, educational assistants, school staff and students.”

And a final excerpt from the Globe and Mail in January 2019:

“Including special-needs students with behavioural issues in regular classrooms has become a matter of debate in many parts of the country, and some educators wonder if it’s gone too far without a rethinking of how children with diverse needs are taught... Teachers report an increase in violence in schools, from threats to physical attacks, that they say makes teaching more difficult.”

A recent document from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) provides information from a symposium that was held specifically to address teachers’ perceptions of violence and aggression on the part of students with disabilities. The symposium

“... was envisioned as a response to a deeply troubling rise in the number of education workers and teachers who were experiencing significant and at times life-altering injuries through their work with students often described as having ‘special needs,’ but who participants in our symposium came to understand as having ‘special rights.’”

The OSSTF document goes on to state that students are “not the fundamental cause of workplace injuries. OSSTF/FEESO members were always clear that the real problem was lack of support, insufficient staffing levels and training, and a culture of telling workers to just ‘tough it out.’ We knew this was unfair to students and staff alike.”

The document draws on contemporary understandings of aggressive and/or violent behaviour among people with developmental disabilities, stating that “misbehaviour is generally not intentional or malicious, but an attempt to communicate distress. Our task is to find ways to support students while ensuring all staff have what they need to return home safely at the end of the day.”

Similarly, a recent report of the organization Violence and Harassment Against Educators quotes an education worker as saying:

“I think many of us struggle with terms like 'violence' [which] suggests intent to harm. Many behaviours we deal with are violent in nature, however, the students themselves are not violent in nature – they don't have the ability to express themselves in a safe/expected manner (e.g., poor communication or self-regulation skills).”

While this report has an overwhelming and problematic focus on students perpetrating violence against educators, it offers a valuable picture into the everyday lives of educators:

“I am usually able to de-escalate a situation before it gets out of control. Having said that, I am only able to de-escalate a student or prevent an aggressive episode when the appropriate supports are put into place. When we [the staff] are stretched between students then we are unable to provide the support needed to keep students actively engaged, appropriately challenged, and in control of their behaviours.”

“I was often left by myself in a padded room with an extremely violent grade four boy. I have permanent nerve damage in my leg. I ended up on a mental medical leave due to panic attacks.”

“I worked in a grade one classroom with another EA and teacher. I had six kids with complex needs; four of the six students had one-to-one support the previous year and last year this support was cut down to two EAs with no coverage for our lunches and breaks.”

“There has been a decrease in the amount of EAs to a school. We are asked to support multiple students who are entitled to individual EAs. And students who are suspected to have a special need but are not diagnosed will be piggy backed onto a student who has an EA. Sometimes multiple students are placed in one EA's care. This can result in an increase of behaviours and safety concerns.”

“The educational assistant job has drastically changed since beginning my career. It is no longer about academic and physical needs of students. It is strictly behaviour support for all students, identified or not.”

“I come home so exhausted from trying to keep one step ahead and making sure the kids that I work with get what they need and that their behaviours do not escalate.”

“There are no strategies. If you take time off work you are questioned. If you report the violence the fix is protective equipment.”

This group has put forward recommendations that are in line with other reports covered above, including increases to in-school resources for students (e.g., augmented health services, additional support staff, smaller classes), and training for both educators and administrators.^[9]

Ontario’s human rights commitments with respect to education

According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) *Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities*, “education providers have a legal obligation to accommodate students with disabilities up to the point of undue hardship. All students with disabilities, even students whose behaviour is disruptive, are entitled to receive accommodation.” The policy also states that:

“Educators must consider a range of strategies to address disruptive behaviour. Such strategies will include reassessing and, where necessary, modifying the student’s accommodation plan, providing additional supports, implementing alternative learning techniques, and other forms of positive behavioural intervention.”^[10]

The OHRC policy contains a wealth of guidance related to exclusion, seclusion, and restraint of students with disabilities. The guidance revolves around respect for human dignity:

“The duty to accommodate students with disabilities means accommodation must be provided in the way that most respects the dignity of the student, if doing so does not cause undue hardship. Human dignity encompasses individual self-respect, self-worth and inherent worth as a human being. It includes physical and psychological integrity and empowerment. It is harmed when students are marginalized, stigmatized, ignored or devalued. Privacy, confidentiality, comfort, individuality and self-esteem are all important factors.”

Where educational policies meant to minimize risk intrude on the dignity and equality of students with disabilities, education providers must show that those policies are necessary and reasonable. Further, if a student with a disability behaves in a way which may affect the well-being of others, an education provider is required to take steps to provide accommodations that prevent or address that behaviour, in a way that respects their dignity:

“Education providers must consider a range of strategies to address the behaviour. Strategies will include assessing, and where necessary, reassessing and modifying any accommodations that are already in place for the student, and/or providing or arranging for additional supports.”

“Where an education provider excludes a student from school for disability-related behaviour because of alleged health and safety risks without objective and direct evidence, and without being able to meet the undue hardship test set out in the Code, this will raise human rights concerns.”

“Even where a student with a disability poses a risk to him or herself or the safety of others, an education provider still has a duty to canvass other accommodation options, including separate services, where possible and appropriate.”

(5) Recommendations

As noted above, previous Canadian studies on exclusion, restraint, and seclusion have been consistent in their recommendations, generally calling for the following changes:

- Increase access to appropriate and adequate supports for students, including Educational Assistants, Early Childhood Educators, special education teachers, and other professional staff.
- Provide education and training for teachers, other instructional and support staff, and school administrators on methods that work to prevent situations where exclusion, restraint, or seclusion are felt to be a necessary response.
- Eliminate or comprehensively limit the use of seclusion, restraint, and informal exclusions in schools.
- Create clear and enforceable provincial regulations and policy re: seclusion, restraint, and informal exclusions in schools.
- Require the documentation and reporting of all instances of seclusion, restraint, and informal exclusion, including public reporting at the school board and Ministry levels.

We develop these recommendations further in the section below.

Recommendation 1:

Increase access to appropriate and adequate staffing and other supports for students

In the provincial education curriculum, the Government of Ontario has stated that human rights law “requires educators and school leaders to prevent and respond appropriately to discrimination and harassment, to create an inclusive environment, to remove barriers that limit the ability of students, and to provide accommodations, where necessary.”^[11]

Of course, educators and school leaders cannot create inclusive environments without adequate resources. UNICEF has defined ‘inclusive educational environments’ as those “that adapt the

design and physical structures, teaching methods, and curriculum as well as the culture, policy and practice of education environments so that they are accessible to all students without discrimination.”^[12] For students with disabilities, access to well-trained educational and support staff that understand their role in creating inclusive environments is a fundamental requirement.

It is clear that the students represented in the Ontario School Inclusion Survey do not have sufficient access to the staffing and other resources they need to be effectively included in their schools. Caregivers repeatedly identified a shortage of classroom staff, including Educational Assistants, special education teachers, and Early Childhood Educators as contributing to social and educational exclusion, a lack of learning outcomes, and the use of seclusion and restraint. All students have a right to be included in the regular classroom, and this includes a right to the resources, accommodations, and trained support staff necessary to make that happen, to the point of undue hardship.^[13]

It is also crucially important that students with disabilities be supported by staff that know them well, understand their communication, and know what strategies work to maximize their well-being, learning, and inclusion with peers and in the broader school community. This means that staff have time to build trust with the students they teach and support - rather than having a constantly changing stream of people coming in and out of students' lives, as was repeatedly described by caregivers:

“My child did not receive the educational supports outlined in his IEP, in order for him to be most successful, due to other students having greater needs. The teacher openly shared she needed to support the other children with greater needs.”

“The need for an EA is paramount for her safety but it still hasn’t been provided.”

“We need more EAs and supports in schools. The teachers and staff do the best they can, but in order to avoid them getting burnt out, they need the assistance. More eyes and ears around may also help with the bullying and keep those kids accountable.”

“It’s very frustrating having the board continue to collect his funding from the Ministry but no programming for 3+ years.”

It is also critical that educational and administrative staff avoid actions that stigmatize students with disabilities. Too often, students with disabilities are singled out, separated from their peers, and removed from the informal networks that are central to school inclusion and belonging. Consistent and thoughtful training of school staff is a foundational factor in preventing this exclusion and ensuring positive educational and social outcomes.

Recommendation 2:

Increase access to trauma-informed training for educational staff and administrators

A lack of knowledge and understanding among administrators and educational staff was a common theme in survey responses, particularly among caregivers who reported that their child sometimes engaged in challenging behaviour (including aggression or self-harm).^[14] Very often, it seems that the school response to such situations is to turn to restraint and seclusion, and to send the student home or instruct them to stay home, often without regard for a family's ability to support the student during the day.

Decades of research has demonstrated that challenging behaviour is most often a communication by a person that something isn't right. It takes knowledge, expertise, patience, and time to understand what people are expressing, especially if they do not use spoken words to communicate. Knowledge and expertise begin with training that is grounded in proven practices.

Trauma-informed training begins with the assumption that many students with disabilities bring the residue of past traumatic experiences with them into the school and classroom.

Understanding this possible trauma, including trauma experienced in the education system (e.g., exclusion, bullying, physical violence, etc.), is an important step in understanding the situations and events that can lead to challenging behaviour.

Both women and men who have a developmental disability are at high risk of experiencing emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. This is especially true for women: in Canada, the rate of violent victimization among women with cognitive disabilities (which include learning, intellectual and memory disabilities) is four times higher than for those without a disability. For many, victimization is first experienced in childhood.^[15]

Well-trained and knowledgeable educators and administrators will get to know students with disabilities and their families, and will learn how they can work to meet their needs, understand how they communicate, and anticipate and work to prevent challenging behaviours. If prevention fails, they will understand what to do when behaviours happen. This should only involve safe and research-based use of physical restraint in an exceedingly low number of cases, for example when a student is engaging in self-harm or active violence toward another person.

Judging from caregiver accounts, the reality in many schools is that a lack of expertise is exacerbating anxiety, stress, and challenging behaviour among students:

“The staff are not trained well at all in supporting children with behavioral issues and trauma. My son continues to be retraumatized at school and does not feel safe there.”

“I witnessed [staff] escalating distress unnecessarily, using intimidation, ignoring, and verbally abusive tactics. This appeared to be accepted by the other staff.”

“There is not enough training amongst the staff for them to understand how to help/teach a person with autism. My child has a right to an education as much as a neurotypical child does. I understand the education might look different, but I know what he has received this past year has been the absolute minimum of what should have been. Not to mention because of lack of supports and resources, his behaviours have increased significantly as a result.”

“My child has suffered socially with constantly being suspended from school. He had no risk to anyone, they just didn’t want to deal with his behaviour. He now only goes for a few hours a day.”

The Ministry of Education, school boards, and teachers’ unions must find a way to increase the access of educational staff to relevant, trauma-informed training that addresses the specific needs of students with disabilities.

Recommendation 3:

Implement clear provincial regulation and policy re: exclusion and partial-day attendance

Section 265(1)(m) of the *Education Act* (sometimes referred to as the ‘exclusion provision’) gives

principals the power to “refuse to admit to the school or classroom a person whose presence in the school or classroom would, in their judgement, be detrimental to the physical or mental well-being of other students.” *Policy and Program Memorandum 145* (Progressive discipline and promoting positive student behaviour), as well as the 2010 document *Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario*, complement and expand on this provision.

The *Education Act* (specifically, Ontario Regulation 298, Operation of Schools – General) also allows school boards to shorten the school day of an exceptional pupil to less than the normal hours of instruction, if it is considered to be of benefit to the student.

There is a growing understanding that these guiding documents are fundamentally flawed, and that they are being misused with students who may engage in challenging behaviours. For example, PPM 145 takes the stance that challenging behaviour should be corrected with discipline, arguably places the blame for ‘inappropriate behaviour’ on students, and ignores pervasive shortcomings in the education system that disproportionately affect students with disabilities:

“When inappropriate behaviour occurs, disciplinary measures should be applied within a framework that shifts the focus from one that is solely punitive to one that is both corrective and supportive. Schools should utilize a range of interventions, supports, and consequences that are developmentally and socio-emotionally appropriate and include learning opportunities for reinforcing positive behaviour while helping students to make better choices.”^[16]

There appears to be a grave misunderstanding at the heart of this guidance. What students who struggle with self-regulation overwhelmingly need is not discipline or help making ‘better choices,’ but rather knowledgeable and consistent staff, appropriate accommodations, changes to the school culture and environment, and responsive supports.

There is a pressing need for the province to develop evidence-based policy that will reduce the use of exclusion as a response to challenging behaviours among students with disabilities. Such a policy would:

- Position challenging behaviour among students with disabilities primarily as communication, and as a response to negative social and environmental stimuli.
- Place the onus on administrators and educational staff to work closely with caregivers and professionals to identify and address the negative social and environmental stimuli that influence challenging behaviour. In many cases caregivers will know best how to proactively prevent challenging behaviours, and how to de-escalate when challenging situations arise.
- Place time limits on the use of modified days/partial-day attendance.
- Implement a clear appeals process for students who are being informally excluded from their school.
- Require board-level and provincial reporting on students who attend school on a part-time/modified basis.
- Address situations where students and/or caregivers (rather than administrators) make the decision to attend school on a part-time basis because of negative social and environmental factors.

Recommendation 4:

Implement clear provincial regulation and policy re: seclusion and restraint

There is currently no Ministry of Education regulation or policy on the use of seclusion or restraint in schools. To attempt to fill this gap, some school boards have developed their own guidance. We provide the following excerpts as examples, without commenting on the quality or appropriateness of the policies.

- The Toronto District School Board has published *Operational Procedure PR699, Management for Risk of Injury Behaviours*,^[17] which includes sections on ‘Separate Spaces in TDSB Schools’ and a ‘physical intervention protocol.’ The latter protocol notes that:

“The Board recognizes that if a student is physically restrained, the student will usually struggle more forcefully to escape. Any use of physical restraint/ containment presents a potential risk of injury to both the student and staff, and to continue to physically restrain/contain the student until they calm only increases the potential for injury. Therefore, it is the position of the Board that physical intervention/restraint/containment must not be used until the student becomes calm. Rather, the student should be contained and released as quickly as possible.”

- The Waterloo Region District School Board has published *Administrative Procedure 2330, Management Process for Student Behaviours Causing a Risk-of-Injury*,^[18] which includes the following guidance:

“Contain-and-Release” refers to the use of physical containment holding techniques that restrict a student’s ability to move freely only until the risk-of-injury to self or others is no longer imminent, rather than until the student is calm. Whenever possible, a first priority is to remove the target of a student who is striking, kicking, grabbing or biting to avoid injury. However, ‘contain-and-release’ is an appropriate staff response to strikes, kicks, grabs or bites from a student, (i.e., student initiated physical aggression), when the staff member is unable to avoid or get away from the student. It is important that the methods used do not result in pain or injury to the student.”

- With respect to seclusion rooms, the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) has published *Administrative Procedures Memorandum A8525*,^[19] which states that:

“... the SCDSB does not support the use of any type of room as a form of involuntary isolation and/or for disciplinary purposes. As well, the SCDSB does not support physically restricting a student’s ability to exit a room, except in the case of an emergency in order to protect the safety of student(s) and/or staff from risk of injury.”

- The Durham Catholic District School Board has also published a policy on the use of seclusion rooms.^[20] This policy implies the use of restraint and exclusion, and allows for involuntary seclusion. It differs substantially from that used in Simcoe County:

“Considerable caution must be exercised in the use of time-out rooms/isolation rooms as a method of managing inappropriate behaviour on an ongoing basis.

“In a situation where extreme behaviour occurs and there is an imminent safety risk, it may be necessary to escort a student to a time-out room until the parent or guardian can come to the school to take the student home.

“If a time-out/calm room/isolation room is used:

- The student must be under continuous supervision by an adult who is either in the room or who has instant access to the room;
- The student must be removed from the room as soon as there is an indication that the imminent risk of safety has subsided;
- It must not contain any objects that could be used by the student to injure him/herself.
- It must not be locked, which includes holding the door shut.”

This small sample shows that similar student behaviours are being responded to differently across school boards. Furthermore, many school boards have not published policies or procedures with respect to restraint or seclusion. The lack of a common and coherent approach is troubling in a context where restraint and seclusion are happening on a broad scale.

We strongly recommend that the Ministry of Education develop policies and procedures that (a) eliminate or drastically limit the use of involuntary seclusion and physical restraint of students with disabilities, (b) outline specific situations in which these approaches are to be used, and (c) clarify that neither seclusion nor restraint be used as disciplinary measures. Additionally, there should be clear procedures for informing caregivers, and for students and caregivers to challenge and/or appeal the use of involuntary seclusion and restraint.

We also recommend that the Ministry of Education create protocols and procedures that promote positive and responsive supports, with particular attention to proactive behaviour management strategies, adapting the school culture and environment, and promoting inclusion within classrooms.

Recommendation 5:

Require schools, school boards, and the Ministry of Education to track and report on the use of seclusion, restraint, and exclusion

In cases where students are restrained and/or secluded, we recommend that:

- School administrators be required to notify the student's parents or guardians in writing, on the same day that the restraint and/or seclusion occurs.
- Schools be required to report on the number of students who have been restrained and/or involuntarily secluded, the length of each instance of restraint and/or seclusion, and the number of instances per student. In turn, school boards and the Ministry of Education should publish annual statistics on the use of restraint and seclusion.

In cases where students are attending school for less than the full instructional day, we recommend that schools, school boards, and the Ministry of Education be required to report on the number of students attending for a partial or modified day, and the key reason(s) for those decisions.

6. Conclusion

In 2023, the Ontario Legislature passed *The Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act*. In its press release on the Act, the Ministry of Education stated that the legislation would “ensure the province’s public education system focuses on what matters most: important life-long skills, like reading, writing and math.”^[21]

Skills are of course crucial to the long-term quality of life and well-being of Ontario’s citizens. At the same time, we would argue that safety, mental health, predictability, and a sense of belonging are even more basic to student success. Unfortunately, results from the Ontario School Inclusion Survey show that far too many students cannot take their safety, mental health, or sense of belonging for granted.

In the same press release, the Ministry of Education focused on “increasing accountability and transparency by allowing the Minister of Education to set priorities in important areas of student achievement, like reading and math, and requiring school boards to update parents on progress.” Yet there is no provincial guidance on the serious and potentially life-changing issues of seclusion or restraint, and no requirement that parents even be informed when their child is subjected to such treatment.

The *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act* also includes elements meant to ensure that “new teachers and educators have the skills they need to teach students effectively in math, reading and literacy.” Yet the Ministry allows these new teachers to enter, without adequate training, into school environments that are ill-equipped to support the basic social and emotional needs of students with disabilities.

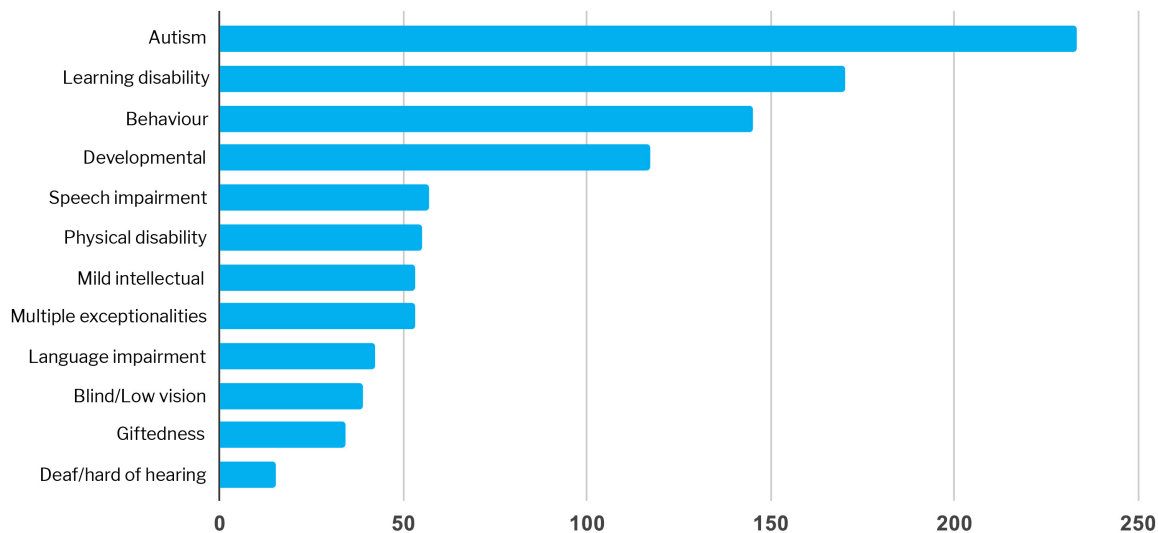
While the Ministry has increased its attention to standardization, accountability, and transparency, the issues of exclusion, seclusion and restraint have not benefited from a cohesive provincial approach. School boards and principals are creating their own policies and implementing those policies in drastically different ways. It is time for the province to turn its attention to these issues, to bring a cohesive approach to address them, and to prioritize the well-being of students with disabilities.

Appendix A: Student and Caregiver Demographics

‘Exceptionalities’ identified among students

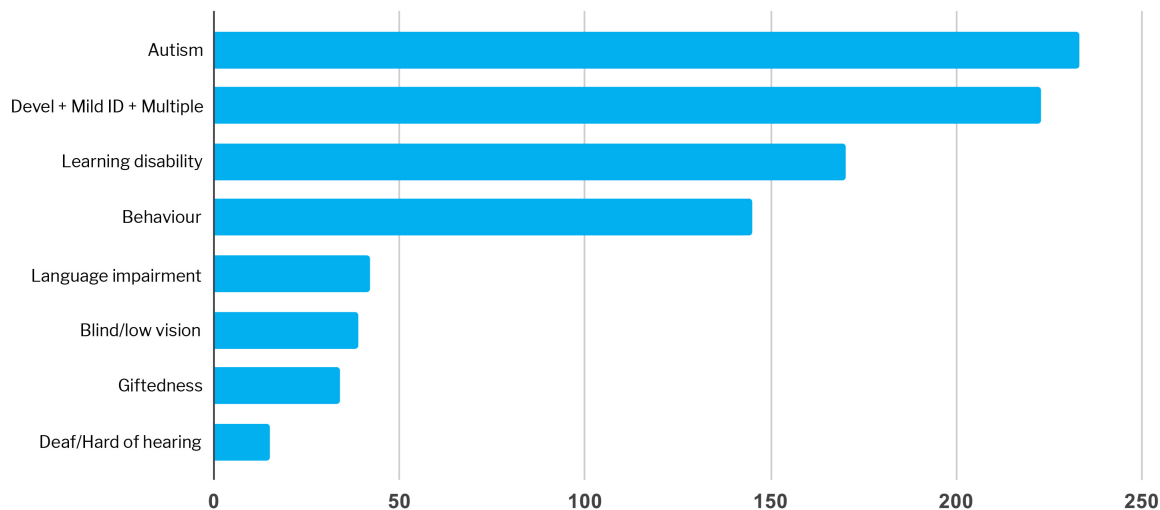
Caregivers indicated just over 1,000 ‘exceptionality’ identifications for 541 students.^[22] Autism, learning disability, behaviour exceptionality, and developmental disability were the most common identifications.

Identifications (#)



If we combine the non-autism identifications that can feasibly fit under the umbrella of developmental disability (i.e., developmental disability, mild intellectual disability, and multiple exceptionalities), we get a slightly different picture.

Identifications (#)



If we pull autism under the umbrella of developmental disability, 63% of students in the survey (n = 340) are encompassed under this category, i.e., identified with at least one of autism, developmental disability, mild intellectual disability, or multiple exceptionalities.^{[23] [24]}

Lastly, three-quarters of students in the survey (n = 405) were identified by caregivers with at least one of the following: autism, developmental disability, mild intellectual disability, multiple exceptionalities, or behaviour exceptionality.

Additionally of note:

- 13% of students (n = 71) were identified as autistic only.
- 30% of students (n = 164) were identified as autistic, plus one or more other identifications (e.g., developmental or mild intellectual disability, behaviour exceptionality, etc.).
- 7% of students (n = 35) had an identification of learning disability only.
- 25% of students were identified as having a learning disability along with one or several other identifications. The most common co-identifications with learning disability were autism (n = 71), behaviour (n = 60), and developmental disability (n = 44).
- Eight students had an identification of only giftedness, and 34 were identified as gifted with other identifications. The most common co-identifications with giftedness were learning disability (n = 9), behaviour (n = 8), and autism (n = 7).

Student age and grade

As shown in Chart A and Chart B below, survey results include a wide range of student age and grade levels, which allowed us to analyze findings across the full school system.

Chart A – Proportion of students by age range (%)

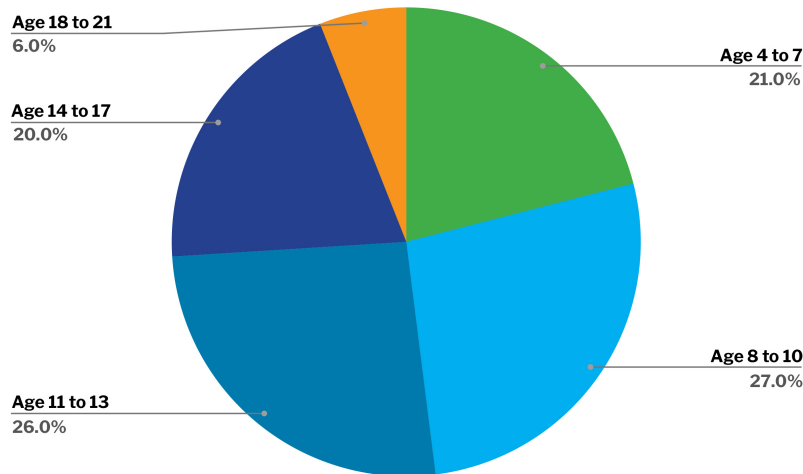
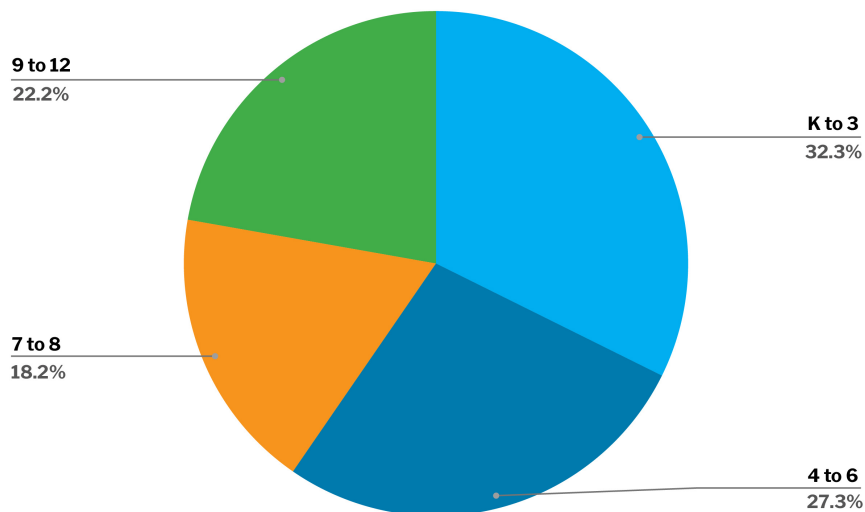


Chart B – Proportion of students by grade range (%)



Student gender

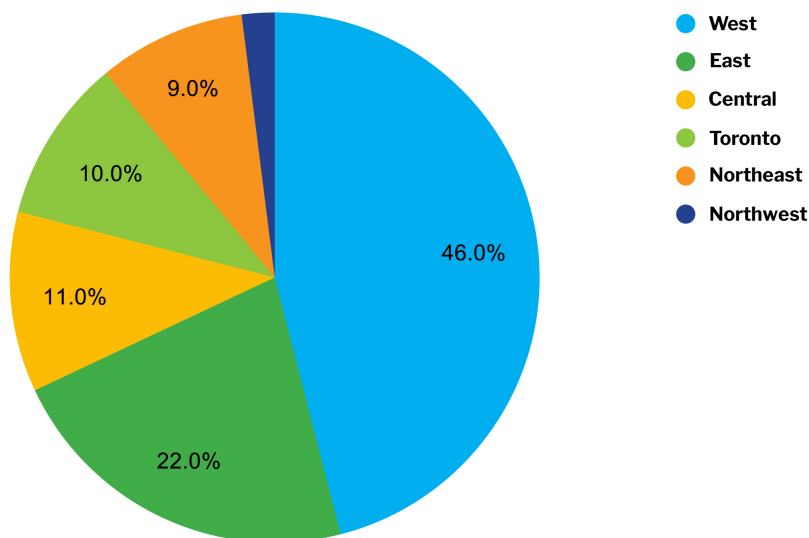
Almost two of every three students represented in the survey were male. This is likely connected to the survey's large proportion of students who have a developmental disability, and the fact that developmental disability is more common among males.^[25]

	#	%
Male	335	61.9
Female	182	33.6
Gender non-conforming	11	2.0
Transgender	6	1.1
Prefer not to say/missing	7	1.3
Total	541	100

Student region

The survey data includes responses for at least one student in 70 of the 72 school boards and schooling authorities across the province. The largest proportion of students was in the West region and the smallest was in the Northwest region. No single school board or schooling authority was significantly overrepresented. The three school boards with the most students in the study (approximately 6% each) were located in the West and Toronto regions.

Chart C – Proportion of students by region (%)

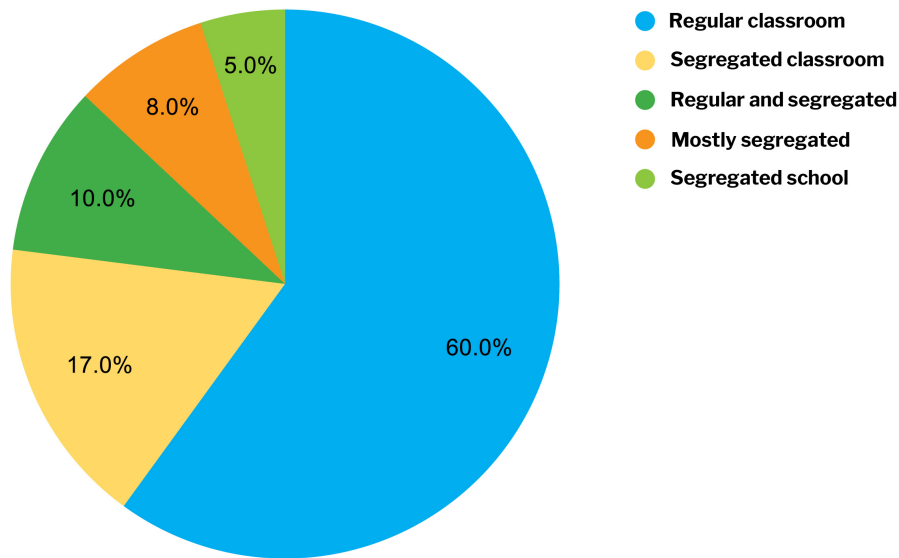


Class Placement

In the 2022/2023 school year, 60% of students in the study spent all of their school day in a

regular class, with varying types and degrees of support. Nearly one quarter were in a segregated school or classroom full-time, and one in five spent time in both regular and segregated classrooms.

Chart D – Class placement (%)



Respondents' relationship to student

The majority of respondents to the survey were biological mothers of students (80%), followed by fathers (13%), grandparents (5%), and other legal guardians including foster and adoptive parents (3%). One quarter of respondents provided information for more than one student, with most of these (18% of all respondents) representing two students.

Student and respondent characteristics

The grand majority (88%) of respondent caregivers identified as white, and 92% reported English as their first language. 97% of students in the study were born in Canada.

The relative lack of racial diversity among respondents has important implications for interpretation of the data. As noted above, this report should be seen as suggestive rather than representative of the general population. Given what we know about the often negative experiences of racialized and newcomer populations in Ontario's education system and in Canada more broadly,^[26] we believe that the actual proportion of students experiencing exclusion, restraint, and seclusion is higher than the figures reported in this document.

Race, ethnicity and/or cultural background of respondents

	#
White	475
First Nations	29
Métis	17
Black	16
East Asian	6
Middle Eastern	5
Latin American	5
South Asian	4
Inuit	2
Southeast Asian	2
Total	561

Caregiver education and income levels

Respondents reported a diverse range of education and income levels, as shown in Chart E and Chart F, below.

Chart E - Respondent education (%)

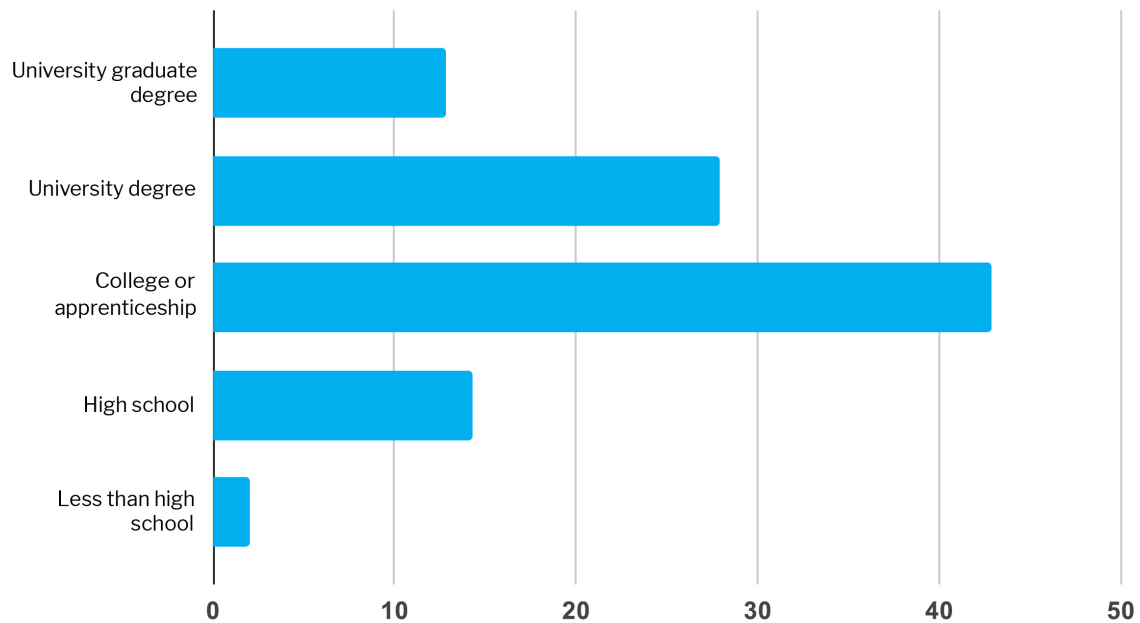
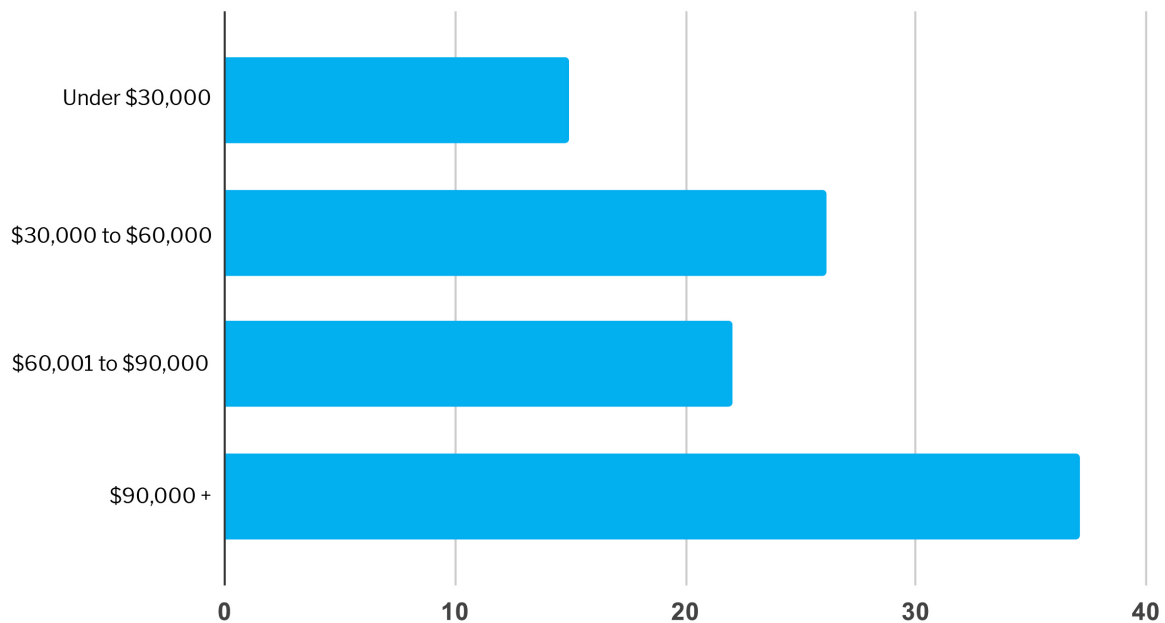


Chart F - Respondent family income (%)



ENDNOTES

- 1.** People for Education (2024). Access to Special Education in Ontario Schools: The gaps and challenges. <https://peopleforeducation.ca/our-work/access-to-special-education-in-ontario-schools-the-gaps-and-challenges>.
- 2.** Some findings may sum to more or less than 100% due to rounding.
- 3.** Inclusion BC (2017). Stop hurting kids II: Restraint and seclusion in BC schools. https://inclusionbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/InclusionBC_StopHurtingKids2.pdf.
- 4.** Inclusion Alberta (2018). Use of seclusion and restraints in schools. https://inclusionalberta.org/clientuploads/Seclusion_and_Restraint_Survey_Results.pdf.
- 5.** N. Bartlett & T.F. Ellis (2020). Interrogating Sanctioned Violence: A Survey of Parents/Guardians of Children with Disabilities about Restraint and Seclusion in Manitoba's Schools. Canadian Journal of Disability Studies 9.5.
- 6.** Quebec Association for Intellectual Disability (2023). Control measures in Quebec schools. <https://www.sqdi.ca/en/news/survey-results-report-on-control-measures-in-quebec-schools>.
- 7.** Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2023). ETFO violence survey results, May 2023. <https://www.etfo.ca/news-publications/publications/etfo-violence-survey-results>.
- 8.** Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2023). ETFO member survey shows violence pervasive in schools. <https://www.etfo.ca/news-publications/media-releases/etfo-member-survey-shows-violence-pervasive-in-schools>.
- 9.** Harassment and Violence Against Educators (2021). [In harm's way: The epidemic of violence against education sector workers in Ontario](#).
- 10.** Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018). Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities. <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-accessible-education-students-disabilities>.

- 11.** Ontario Ministry of Education (2024). Considerations for program planning: Human rights, equity, and inclusive education. <https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/human-rights-equity-and-inclusive-education>.
- 12.** UNICEF (2017). Inclusive education. https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/IE_summary_accessible_220917_0.pdf.
- 13.** Ontario Human Rights Commission (2004). Guidelines on accessible education. https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/Guidelines%20on%20accessible%20education_2004.pdf.
- 14.** The UK organization Mencap has helpfully defined ‘challenging behaviour’ as behaviour “that is challenging to parents, carers, teachers and other professionals. Challenging behaviour can include tantrums, hitting or kicking other people, throwing things or self-harming. Behaviour is challenging if it is harmful to the person and others around them, and if it stops the person achieving things in their daily life, such as making friends or concentrating at school. Living with challenging behaviour can be a stressful and exhausting time.~ Every day activities, such as going to school or to the park, can become more complicated.” See <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions-linked-learning-disability/challenging-behaviour> for more information.
- 15.** Statistics Canada (2014). Violent victimization of women with disabilities, 2014. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.htm>.
- 16.** Ontario Ministry of Education (2018). Policy/Program Memorandum 145: Progressive discipline and promoting positive student behaviour. <https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-145>.
- 17.** Toronto District School Board (2021). Management for risk of injury behaviours. <https://ppf.tdsb.on.ca/uploads/files/live/99/1395.pdf>.
- 18.** Waterloo Region District School Board (2019). Management process for student behaviours causing a risk-of-injury. <https://www.wrdsb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2330-Management-Process-for-Student-Behaviours-causing-a-Risk-of-Injury.pdf>.
- 19.** Simcoe County District School Board (2019). Use of calming rooms as a proactive self-regulation strategy. <https://www.scdsb.on.ca/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=916992>.
- 20.** Durham Catholic District School Board (2019). Safe physical interventions for student behaviours causing a risk of injury. <https://www.dcdsb.ca/en/resourcesGeneral/Policy/2019-Feb-4/POSTED-804-3-Safe-Physical-Interventions-for-Student-Behaviours-Causing-a-Risk-of-Injury---2nd-Reading.pdf>.

21. Government of Ontario (2023). Province improving accountability and transparency in Ontario schools. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1002939/province-improving-accountability-and-transparency-in-ontario-schools>.

22. For more information on exceptionalities in the Ontario education system, see <https://www.ontario.ca/document/special-education-ontario-policy-and-resource-guide-kindergarten-grade-12/categories>.

23. According to the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), “Autism is a developmental disability that affects how we experience the world around us. Autistic people are an important part of the world. Autism is a normal part of life, and makes us who we are.”

According to the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), “A developmental disability is present at birth or develops before 18 years of age, affects a person’s ability to learn, is permanent, and can be mild or severe.” <https://www.ontario.ca/page/adults-developmental-disabilities-ontario>.

24. For a complete list and definitions of the twelve Ontario Ministry of Education ‘exceptionalities,’ please see <https://www.ontario.ca/document/special-education-ontario-policy-and-resource-guide-kindergarten-grade-12/categories>.

25. Statistics Canada (2021). Developmental disabilities or disorders in Canada – Highlights from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/infographic-developmental-disabilities-disorder-highlights-canadian-survey-2017.html>.

26. See, for example:

Ontario Human Rights Commission (2017). Under suspicion: Concerns about racial profiling in education. <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/under-suspicion-concerns-about-racial-profiling-education>.

Pathways to Education (2019). Mistrust and low expectations: Educational disadvantage and Black youth in Ontario. https://youthrex.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/BlackYouth_Research_Spotlight_June5.pdf.

E. Chadha, S. Herbert & S. Richard (2020). Review of the Peel District School Board. <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-review-peel-dsb-school-board-report-en-2023-01-12.pdf>.