Equitable Access and Effective Support for Students:

Program Review of the

Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) Program

Greater Essex County District School Board

Final Report

Submitted to:

Chris Mills, Superintendent of Education – Special Education
Greater Essex County District School Board

Submitted by:
Gillian Parekh, York University
Kathryn Underwood, Toronto Metropolitan University
Andrew Allen, University of Windsor
Nicole Ineese-Nash, Toronto Metropolitan University

Parekh, G., Underwood, K., Allen, A., Ineese-Nash, N; Kiyaga, M., Collis, R., & Gordon, A. (2024). *Equitable access and effective support for students: A program review of the Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) Program for the Greater Essex County District School Board*. York University. Toronto, Ontario.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the review of the Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) program within the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB), the research team developed recommendations based on identified system data, interviews and focus groups with students, families, educators, and administrators as well as relevant literature.

EXAMINING THE STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE OF RISE

1. Evidenced opportunities and consequences of tying student support directly to a partially integrated special education program structure.
    1.1 Enhance awareness and ensure implementation of accommodations
    1.2 Professional development opportunities for educators
    1.3 Resource allocation
2. Varied perspectives on the purpose and aims of RISE.
    2.1 Develop and communicate the purpose of RISE

EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RISE FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

3. Mixed results reported for students' academic skills and achievement in RISE.
    3.1 Develop a framework that sets out program expectations for and documents assessment, pedagogical strategies, reporting practices and timelines for the RISE program
    3.2 Support recruitment of teachers with Literacy and Mathematics specializations to inform their pedagogy in RISE
    3.3 Maintain high expectations for student learning
    3.4 Employ differentiated instruction and universal design strategies
4. A trend analysis shows that participation in RISE is highly correlated to elementary and secondary program pathways, which can shape access to postsecondary education.
5. Approximately one-fifth of students entering RISE will leave and join the regular class before the end of Grade 8.
    5.1 Track and share program and pathway information with families
6. Secondary school pathways are fairly distinct, particularly for Mathematics.
7. Students in RISE were more likely to pursue courses and programs that have more limited opportunities to complete an OSSD as well as access to postsecondary education.
    7.1 Ensure access to guidance counsellors with high expectations and knowledge of elementary/secondary/postsecondary pathways
    7.2 Encourage and support students to pursue more challenging pathways
    7.3 When planning for students' programs and pathways, consider the implications for students' future access to postsecondary education

EXAMINING PATHWAYS WHILE CONTROLLING FOR ACHIEVEMENT

8. Even when controlling for achievement, participation in RISE is related to greater barriers for students' secondary and postsecondary options.
    8.1 Investigate and remove potential barriers

RISE AND THE WORK OF FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

9. RISE perceived as the "only option" for support.
        9.1 Diversify support options
        9.2 Engage families in the decision-making process
        9.3 Improve support and recognition for RISE educators
        9.4 Foster a community of practice
        9.5 Value the roles of all educators in the system

10. Families are engaging in extensive labour and are connecting to external services to support their children.
        10.1 Engage families as partners in the care and education of children
        10.2 A greater emphasis on sharing assessment information, and the potential pathways from RISE is needed

RISE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS

11. Partially integrated, partially segregated – RISE as a safe space.
        11.1 Promote inclusive practices
        11.2 Identify and address incidences of disability discrimination
        11.3 Provide comprehensive training for educators on creating inclusive, trauma-informed safe spaces

WHO DO THESE STRUCTURES AFFECT? EXAMINING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

12. Overall demographics suggest that students in RISE, and for most identified special education categories, are more likely to be white, male, speak English as a first language and have always lived in Canada.
        12.1 Ensure equitable access to special education
        12.2 Further examination of the data
        12.3 Capture socioeconomic status in future data collection
        12.4 Adopt culturally responsive support and resources.

13. A need to address and challenge deficit understandings of disability.
        13. 1 Embrace sociocultural perspectives on disability and difference
        13.2 Recognize and respond to intersectional experiences
        13.3 Adopt differentiated instruction and universal design for learning (UDL) in all classrooms

GUIDANCE AROUND SYSTEM CHANGE
Overall, successful systems change requires time and investment. Any restructuring of the RISE program should be done with consideration of the impact on current students, families, and educators. The literature indicates that shifting to an inclusion model requires approximately three to five years (Porter, 2010), and requires an investment, not removal, of resources, including financial, human, and/or technological.

Table of Contents

RESEARCH PROCESS AND TEAM

In fall of 2023, a team of researchers were assembled from across three universities to review the Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) program within the Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB). The review process included a three-pronged approach to enable triangulation of findings: 1) a collection of relevant literature on RISE, similarly structured special education programs, and students' experiences in special education; 2) a review of system data; and 3) interviews or focus groups with students, families, educators, and administrators. The following report discusses each component of the review process and includes recommendations for the GECDSB.

Research Ethics: Ethics approval was reviewed and obtained by York University's Research and Ethics Board (REB) (Certificate number: REB 2023-383), with subsequent review and approval from the University of Windsor and the Toronto Metropolitan University REBs.

Description of Team: Our research team consisted of four researchers and three graduate research assistants. The four co-leads for this review included:

> Gillian Parekh, Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Disability Studies in Education, from the Faculty of Education at York University.

> Kathryn Underwood, Professor, School of Early Childhood Studies, Toronto Metropolitan University.

> Andrew Allen, Associate Professor, and Director of the Joint PhD in Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Windsor.

> Nicole Ineese-Nash, Assistant Professor, Cross-Appointed between the School of Early Childhood Studies and Child and Youth Care, Toronto Metropolitan University.

The three graduate research assistants included:

> Mugabi Kiyaga, Master's student, Faculty of Education, University of Windsor.

> Ryan Collis, Doctoral candidate, Faculty of Education, York University.

> Angelique Gordon, Doctoral candidate, Critical Disability Studies, York University.

PROGRAM REVIEW

In July of 2022, our research team was approached to consider conducting a program review of the Greater Essex County District School Board's Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) program. The central question guiding the review was whether RISE was meeting the needs of participating students. RISE is a partially integrated special education program offered in the majority of elementary schools across the system. Enrolment into RISE is generally capped at 11 students per program. Access to RISE typically requires students to be identified through the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process and assessed as at least two years behind in either Language or Mathematics (or both). Students participating in RISE mostly attend RISE for Language and Mathematics and return to their homeroom for rotary subjects. Our research team and plan were fully assembled and prepared in the Fall 2023. Shortly after we received research ethics approval, data collection began. Over the course of collection, we met with 56 participants, for interviews and/or focus groups, to learn from their experience with the RISE program. Following our qualitative data collection, we worked closely with the board's Information Technology (IT) Department who shared system level data to inform our analyses. To address the question as to whether RISE was meeting the needs of students, we explored how the program addresses students' academic and social needs in the immediate term as well as examined system data to better understand students' long-term outcomes. The following report provides an overview of special education in GECDSB as related to RISE, findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses, and recommendations.

Data and Methods

As noted above, our research team drew on three sources of data to support the review of the GECDSB's Reaching Individual Success and Excellence (RISE) program,: 1) a review of available information on RISE as well as a review of the academic literature around students' intersectional experiences in special education; 2) interviews and focus groups with families, educators, and students around their experience in and outside of RISE; and 3) system data, provided through the GECDSB's IT Department.

Interview and Focus Group Participant Recruitment Process

We conducted a multi-phase recruitment process. To capture plans for student transition to secondary school, we first reached out to students and families of children accessing special education support either through the RISE program or homeroom classroom in Grades 6-8. Invitations to participate were sent out to all eligible families across the system with an online link to the Informed Consent Form. For our second phase, the invitation was extended to families whose children were in Grades 3-5. Similarly, invitations to participate were sent out to elementary educators across the system who were supporting students in RISE, had a history of supporting students in RISE, or who taught students involved in special education in mainstream classes. Due to substantive interest in participation, priority for interviews was first given to educators currently teaching in a RISE program, followed by educators who had a history of teaching in RISE, followed by all other educators interested in speaking with the team. Finally, education coordinators were invited to participate. All participants were offered either individual interviews or focus groups. In total, our team spoke to 56 participants (28 educators, 17 families, 9 students, and 2 education coordinators).

Important context for review

Prior to participant recruitment, messaging about plans to shutter the RISE program was circulating through the system. Many participants shared that it was resistance to these potential closures that urged them to participate in the interviews/focus groups. The perceived threat of closure and rallying of support very likely had an impact on the views shared throughout the interviews and focus groups. As such, it was unsurprising that volunteer participants shared largely positive views of the RISE program and supported its continuation. As an example of public messaging, in anticipation of this review and its recommendations, an article titled "ETFO concerned about review of spec ed program at GECDSB" was published by a local news organization in February 2024 (Loiselle, 2024). Unfortunately, this review has been positioned as a mediating factor pitting program protection against the backdrop of a fiscal crisis and potential staff cuts. To be clear, the authors of this report have examined the programmatic conditions in RISE and have mapped students' academic trajectories following their participation in RISE. Regardless of the system response, under no conditions would the authors recommend or support a decrease in resources or staffing.

Report Organization

The report has been organized around the review's central findings, which are described below, and include recommendations based on research evidence and literature. The system data has been integrated into the report, beginning with a structural overview of special education and its relationship to RISE. System findings on student trajectories and demographics are included in our discussion on pathways and outcomes.

Interpretation of and response to findings

From our interviews and focus groups with participants, it is clear that the RISE program is overwhelmingly valued by the community. We heard from many participants that students were receiving important supports through the RISE program and that educators were able to engage in effective pedagogical practices. However, we also uncovered important structural concerns that warrant further investigation and attention. As such, our findings are nuanced and any response to this report must ensure that it centres the best interest of the children in the program, and any children enrolled in the future.

Context

The region of the City of Windsor and Essex County is a culturally diverse community with a significant immigrant population. For example, over 20% of Windsor's population is born outside of Canada, however because of the relative size of the city (321,700 in the Windsor metropolitan area as of January 2024), many of these immigrant communities are quite small in comparison to those in much larger urban centres like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2024; Workforce Windsor-Essex, 2024). In addition, Windsor ranks third in the proportion of children who have immigrated to Canada or are born to immigrant parents (Schellenberg, 2004). The metropolitan area of the City of Windsor is characterized by significant population density and economic disparities within pockets of working-class

communities each located near industrialized and mostly automotive-related manufacturing plants, the university community, or the downtown core (including the casino). The unemployment rate in the Windsor-Essex region ranks at the highest percentage in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024) and historically it has often been higher than the national average due to its reliance on manufacturing. The disparities in income distribution among its residents are affected by education, employment opportunities, and industry dynamics with the automotive sector having a significant impact on employment and economic growth.

The Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) is unique in that it serves both the City of Windsor and the surrounding county of Essex with smaller rural municipalities. The GECDSB was formed after the 1998 amalgamation of two distinct school boards from the city and the county. Consequently, the school board serves families in quite diverse communities ranging from the downtown core of Windsor to the predominantly farming communities around Leamington and Kingsville. For GECDSB schools, the shifting demographics of the region create challenges in simultaneously serving the needs of various communities characterized by socioeconomic factors; i.e., working-class and high immigrant population in the downtown core, the west end of the city and the university community, and the middle-class to affluent population of LaSalle, Lakeshore, Tecumseh, Riverside, South Windsor, and rural communities like Amherstburg, Essex, Kingsville, Leamington, and Pelee Island.

SYSTEM OVERVIEW

As part of the review, it was important for reviewers to situate RISE within the broader special education system. As such, our research team partnered with IT to provide an overview of program structures and how students were organized across special education settings and identification categories.

Figure 1. Proportion of students involved in special education, Full System as of June 2023
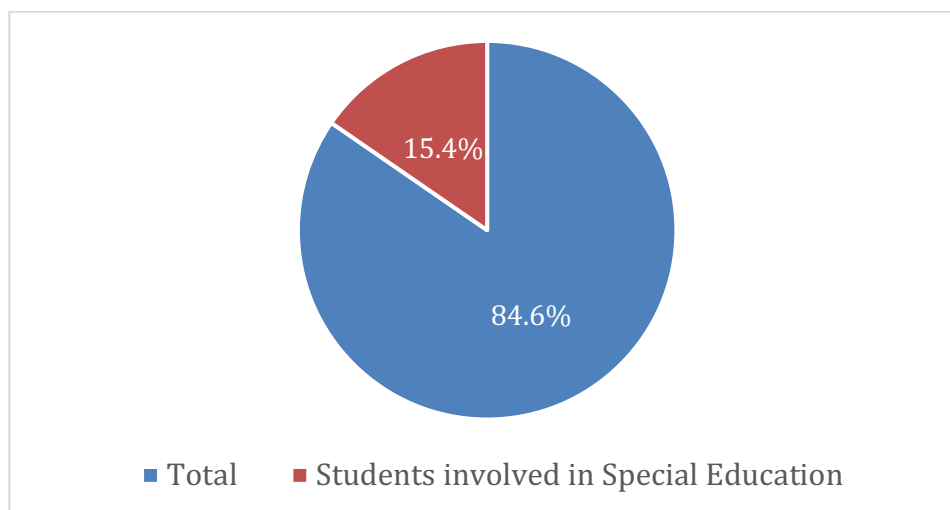
Drawing on full system data as of June 2023, the proportion of students involved in special education within the GECDSB is 15.4%, which somewhat aligns with the Ministry of Education's 2020-2021 provincial figure of 17.3% (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).

Table 1. Students' special education status, counts as of June 2023

Exceptionality category	# of students as of June 2023
Autism	269
Behaviour	167
Developmental Disability	291
IEP ONLY	1442
Language Impairment	107
Learning Disability	1451
Mild Intellectual Disability	462
Multiple Exceptionalities	392
Multiple - LD	764
Multiple - MID	157
Other	73
Giftedness	71
Total	5646

Table 1 includes student counts across special education categories for the full system (as of June 2023). Just over half of the special education population is represented by students who have been identified with a learning disability and students who have not been formally identified through the Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC), but do have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The category of multiple exceptionalities was the third largest exceptionality category. The category of *Multiple Exceptionalities* is defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education as, "A combination of learning or other disorders, impairments, or physical disabilities, that is of such nature as to require, for educational achievement, the services of one or more teachers holding qualifications in special education and the provision of support services appropriate for such disorders, impairments, or disabilities" (Ontario Ministry of Education, current website). This suggests the student requires extensive support from educators qualified in special education. Sometimes the category of multiple exceptionalities is interpreted as having more than one identified exceptionality. In the GECDSB, close to half (45%) of students identified with multiple exceptionalities were taught within the regular class (see Figure 3). To further examine the category of multiple exceptionalities, the category was disaggregated to show students who were identified with multiple exceptionalities, including learning disability, multiple exceptionalities including mild intellectual disability, and all remaining students within the multiple exceptionalities category. The category of 'Other' includes exceptionality categories with fewer than 40 students.

Figure 2. Proportion of students involved in special education across exceptionality categories, Full System as of June 2023

	Language Impairment	Behaviour	Autism	Develop Disability	Mild Intellectual Disability	Learning Disability	Multiple Exceptionalities	Multiple - LD	Multiple - MID	Other	Giftedness	IEP ONLY
■ Series1	1.9%	3.0%	4.8%	5.2%	8.2%	25.7%	6.9%	13.5%	2.8%	1.3%	1.3%	25.5%
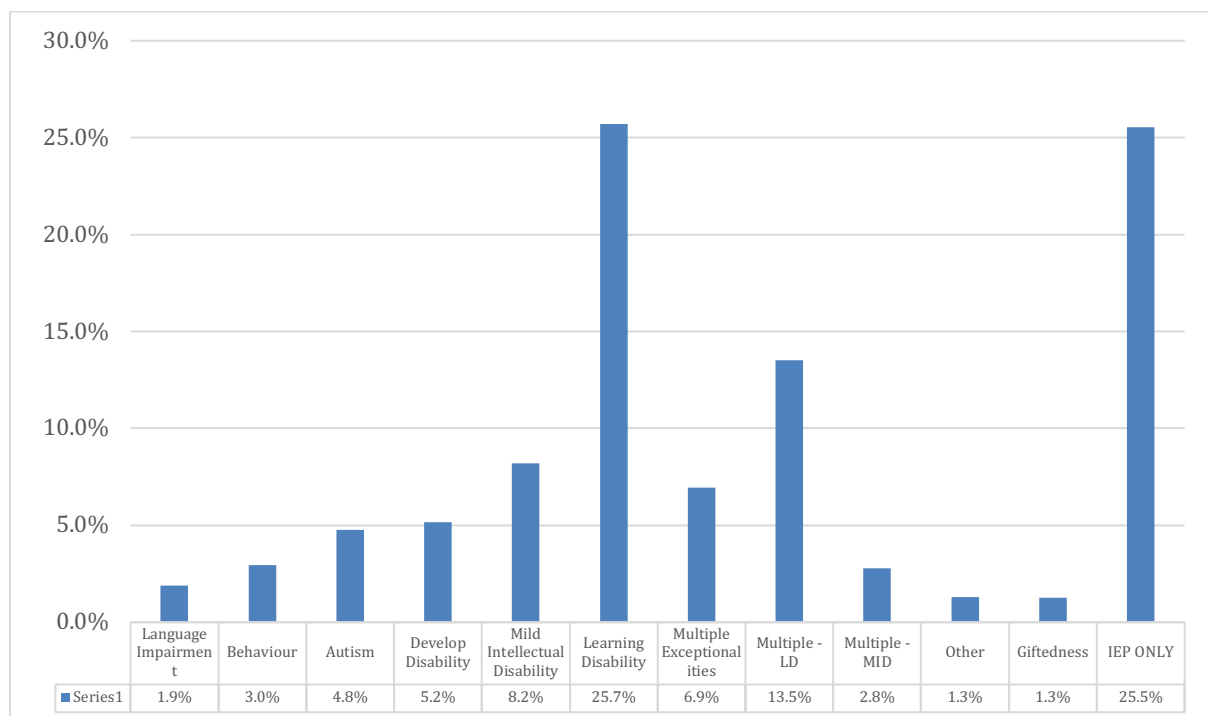
Please note that the total may not be 100% exactly due to rounding.

Of students involved in special education, over three quarters (82.7%) of the special education population was made up of four special education categories. Students identified with a learning

disability accounted for 25.7%, students who were only on an IEP (no IPRC) made up 25.5%, students identified with multiple exceptionalities made up 23.3%, and students identified with a Mild Intellectual Disability accounted for 8.2%.

Table 2. Overall proportion of students across settings and elementary/secondary panels

	Fully Self-Contained		Partially Integrated		Regular Classroom		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Elementary	343	12%	785	28%	1681	60%	2809	100%
Secondary	482	19%			2093	81%	2575	100%
Total	825	15%	785	15.0%	3774	70%	5384	100%

Drawing on Section J data (special education by exceptionalities reported to the Ministry of Education) for October 31, 2023, just over half of students in special education (52%) were in the elementary panel with 48% in the secondary panel. Although fully self-contained programs are offered in both elementary and secondary panels, partially integrated programs, such as RISE, are only available in elementary. Of students in special education, 40% of students in elementary were taught in fully self-contained or partially integrated settings, with 60% taught in the regular classroom. Conversely, in secondary, only 19% of students in special education were learning in fully self-contained classes with 81% learning in the regular class.

Figure 3. Elementary setting information across selected special education category, Section J October 31, 2023

	Autism	Learning Disability	Mild Intellectual Disability	Multiple Exceptionality	IEP Only
Regular Classroom	45%	66%	15%	45%	97%
Partially Integrated	12%	34%	84%	35%	2%
Fully Self-Contained	43%	0	0	21%	2%
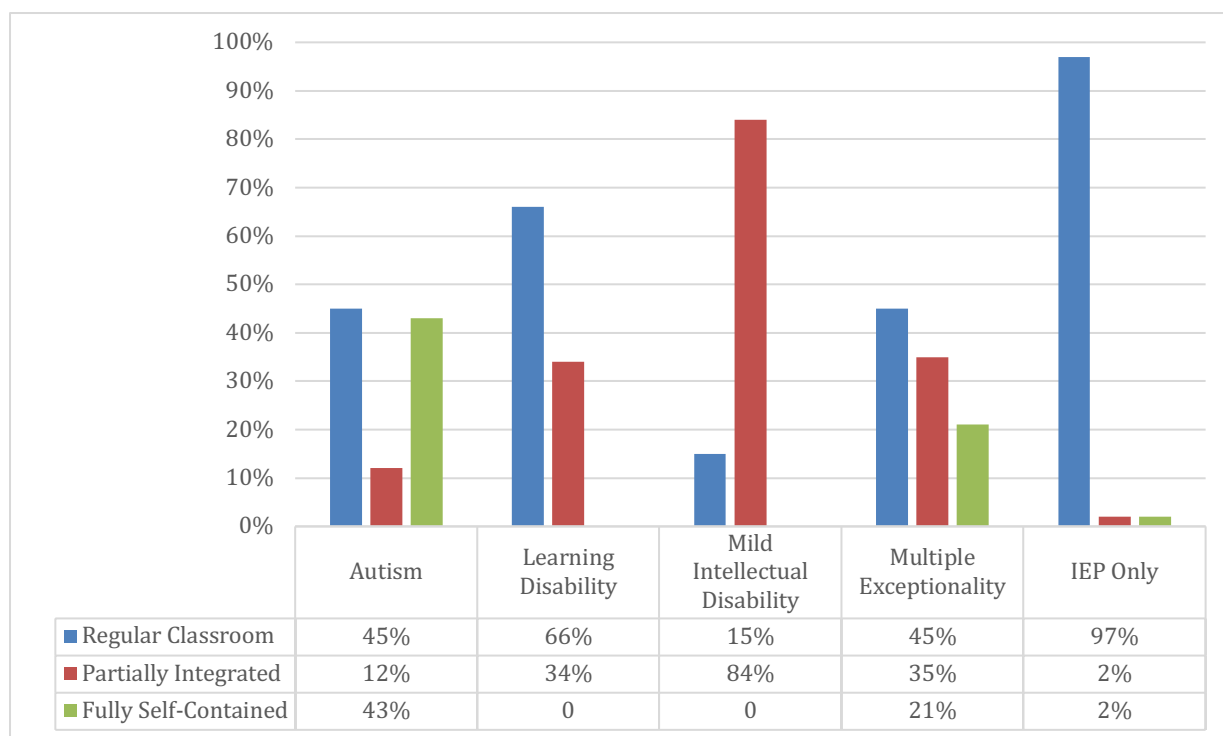
Please note that columns may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Examining selected special education categories reveals notable differences between academic settings. For instance, for students identified with a learning disability, two-thirds (66%) were learning in the regular class with a third (34%) in a partially integrated program. For students identified with a mild intellectual disability, only 15% of students were learning in the regular class with the majority (84%) in a partially integrated setting (such as RISE). For students identified with autism or multiple exceptionalities, close to half (45%) were taught in the regular class, with students identified with autism more likely to be placed in fully self-contained programs (43%) compared to 21% for students identified with multiple exceptionalities. Students on an IEP, with no formal exceptionality, were most likely to be taught in the regular class (97%).

Figure 4. Within a partially integrated setting (RISE), proportion of students across special education categories, Section J October 31, 2023

	Autism	Language Impairment	Learning Disability	Mild Intellectual Disability	Developmental Disability	Multiple Exceptionalities	Other
Proportion	3%	6%	26%	26%	6%	31%	2%
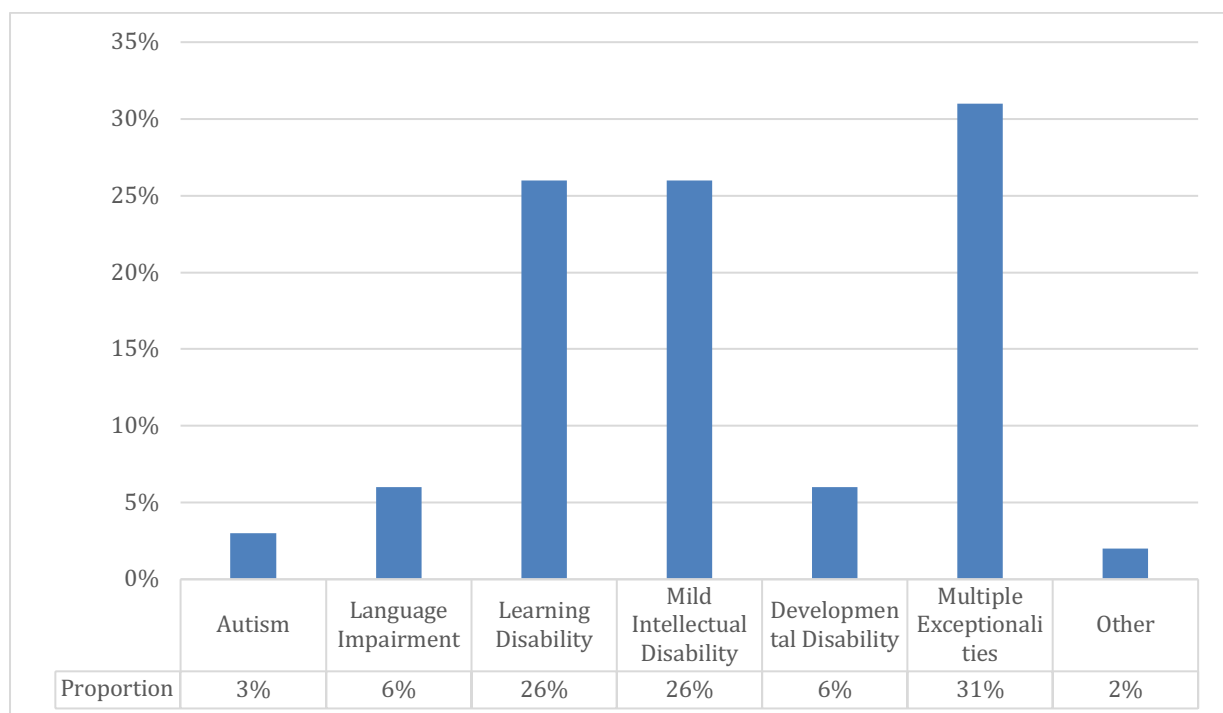
In partially integrated programs, such as RISE, over three quarters (83%) of students fall into the categories of multiple exceptionalities (31%), mild intellectual disability (26%) and learning disability (26%). Students identified with a developmental disability or a language impairment both accounted for 6% each, and with autism at 3%. Please note that categories falling below 15 students were included in 'Other'.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The following findings and recommendations highlight what we have learned from interviews and focus groups, system data, as well as the academic literature.

EXAMINING THE STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE OF RISE

Finding 1. Evidenced opportunities and consequences of tying student support directly to a partially integrated special education program structure.

The RISE program offers concentrated support for students with designated exceptionalities who are behind in the area of Mathematics and/or Language by two years or more. This structure provides small group settings, which allows the opportunity for more individual interactions between students and the RISE teacher. The RISE program typically enrols a maximum of 11 students per class, fostering an environment conducive to developing supportive relationships, offering individualized instruction, and conducting individual assessments intended to be tailored to each student. This setting is also structured to facilitate the implementation of a flexible and responsive curriculum design, with the goal of providing educational content that is directly aligned with students' learning goals. The data from the review indicates that the RISE program is designed to provide specialized support that is not readily available in the broader educational framework of the school board. For instance, educators highlighted their ability to deliver more one-on-one instruction as a key advantage of the program. This approach was described as particularly beneficial for students who require additional assistance and time in mastering curriculum content and skills.

Most students attend RISE for Language and Mathematics, although we did hear of some who attended for a single subject. All other subjects are taught in the mainstream class. The review highlights that while RISE implements a variety of accommodations and adaptations, such as the use of assistive technology and environmental modifications, these supports are often absent in the homeroom class setting. This creates potential barriers for learning and overall educational experience for students who split their time between RISE and homeroom classes. This interruption in support availability underscores a systemic issue, where special education and homeroom practices do not consistently meet the diverse needs of all students.

Educators and families expressed concern over this inconsistency, noting that the lack of accommodations in homeroom classes can hinder students' ability to fully participate in and benefit from all subjects. This reflects the broader challenge of ensuring equitable access to educational support across different learning environments within the school system.

Concurrently, tying resources and support directly to a self-contained program limits the support available to students who remain in the regular classroom and are not selected to participate in RISE. By allocating support outside the regular classroom, the capacity to support all students in the regular classroom is depleted, denying students access to critical resources. As such, the partially integrated structure of RISE can create disparities in access to educational accommodations and support within the broader school environment.

Recommendations:

1.1 Enhance awareness and ensure implementation of accommodations: Schools should reinforce their commitment to fulfilling their duty to accommodate disabled students,[1] as outlined by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2016). This commitment involves not only acknowledging the legal and ethical obligations to support diverse learners, but also actively working to ensure that educators are equipped with the knowledge and resources to effectively implement accommodations and learning strategies in all classroom settings, including the regular class.

1.2 Professional development opportunities for educators: The board should invest in comprehensive professional development programs aimed at enhancing educators' proficiency in incorporating accommodations and adaptations into their teaching practices both for special education and in regular classrooms. These programs should cover a wide range of strategies, including the effective use of assistive devices, the integration of technology to support learning, and the modification and adaptation of the learning environment to better suit the needs of all students. Homeroom teachers should be encouraged to collaborate with special education teachers to deepen the opportunities for inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

1.3 Resource allocation: Allocating resources strategically to support the universal implementation of accommodations can help bridge the gap between specialized programs and regular classrooms. This might include investing in assistive technology that can be used school-wide and creating resource centres for teachers to access materials and support for inclusive teaching practices.

Finding 2. Varied perspectives on the purpose and aims of RISE.

From the interviews with educators, families, and students, there are disparate understandings around the purpose of RISE, ranging from a program where the priority is to create a safe, accepting space with reduced academic demands to a program that maximizes timely, effective skills-focused intervention, with students working towards placement back into a regular classroom.

For instance, some participants focused on how RISE enabled the relational aspects of learning. They valued a supportive and stress-free learning environment that prioritizes students' emotional and social development alongside academic learning. However, other participants viewed RISE as primarily a remedial intervention aimed at intensive, time-limited academic skill development, where the goal is to close educational gaps and enhance achievement so students can successfully reintegrate back into the regular classroom.

---

[1] Through this report, we employ both identity and person first language relating to disability. Identity first language aligns with our sociocultural understanding of disability and is recommended by the American Psychological Association (2022), the Associated Press (2022), and the National Center on Disability and Journalism (2021) in place of terms such as "special education needs."

The disparate views on RISE's purpose have several implications for the program's implementation and effectiveness. The lack of a unified understanding can lead to inconsistencies in program delivery, with some educators prioritizing academic catch-up with others focusing on students' emotional well-being. This inconsistency can affect the students' and their families' expectations of the program and their satisfaction with the outcomes . Furthermore, the varied aims of the program might influence resource allocation, professional development opportunities for educators, the integration of RISE students into mainstream classrooms, or access to the resources in RISE classes for students who are not enrolled. A clear and shared understanding of the program's goals is essential for aligning resources, training, and instructional strategies to effectively support students.

Recommendations:

2.1 Develop and communicate the purpose of RISE: To address the variability in perceptions about RISE's purpose, it is critical for the board and program administrators to clearly define and consistently communicate the program's objectives. This clarification process should involve input from all communities, including educators, parents, and students, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the program's aims.

EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RISE FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Finding 3. Mixed results reported for students' academic skills and achievement in RISE.

In terms of academic achievement, particularly in Literacy and Mathematics, research has shown that inclusive models of education are more likely to result in positive academic outcomes for disabled students (Cole et al., 2021; Gee et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2007; Hehir et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2010, 2015; Signor-Buhl et al., 2006, as outlined in Barron et al., in press). However, direct instruction and intervention are important in all environments (Guralnick, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Mitchell, 2014). Although trending towards the benefits of inclusion, findings around students' social and engagement experiences in school have resulted in more nuanced outcomes (Barron et al., in press). Educators, families, and students reported mixed views on whether RISE positively impacted students' academic skills and achievement. Some families reported academic gains attributable to their child's participation in RISE. These gains are reported as a direct result of the program's structured environment, which includes reduced class sizes, individualized attention, and tailored instructional interactions. "*I think the fact that the teacher has the ability to bring the work right down to the kids' level and work closer with the kids, because there's lower numbers in the RISE room. Then, you have less background noise, you have less disruptions, often you have the use of better resources*" (Parent feedback).

Conversely, other families observed that their children did not experience noticeable improvements in academic skills or overall achievement, despite prolonged participation in the program. As one parent said, "*He's been in the same levels since he started. He has not improved. He has not changed. His work has not improved. His writing is not any different. It has not given him any gains whatsoever in the last three or four years that he's been in it*" (Parent feedback). This discrepancy raises questions about the program's consistency in delivering academic

outcomes across its student population. Academic outcomes have been described as "student-dependent," with some educators and administrators reporting that while RISE provides conditions conducive to academic gains, these outcomes are not uniformly experienced by all students. Several factors could also contribute to these mixed results, including variations in program implementation and envisioned purpose, as well as differences in instructional approaches among educators   .

Students also had mixed reports on whether the work in RISE was challenging enough. One student reported, *"The test we had today was easy. Just easy. Somehow, I don't know how the class didn't know what to do because I was the first one that Miss said got 10 out of 10 on the marks"* (Student feedback). No students reported the work being too difficult, and no students were able to describe examples when they could access more challenging work if they wanted or needed it.

Recommendations:

3.1 Develop a framework that sets out program expectations for and documents assessment, pedagogical strategies, reporting practices and timelines for the RISE program: Research emphasizes the importance of structured, evidence-based interventions. Regular formative assessment, student check-ins, reporting and listening to parents, and transparent educational practices linked to student learning would benefit students enrolled in RISE, and other students in the school.

3.2 Support recruitment of teachers with Literacy and Mathematics specializations to inform their pedagogy in RISE: The employment of specialist teachers, particularly in areas where students typically experience academic difficulties, such as Literacy and Numeracy, is critical when the objective is to expedite students' academic progress to reach grade level. Specialist teachers possess in-depth knowledge and skills in their subject areas, are often trained in differentiated instruction, and should be able to deliver intensive, targeted interventions in multiple classroom settings.

3.3 Maintain high expectations for student learning: Setting high expectations is fundamental to student success. Research has consistently shown that when educators hold high expectations, students are more likely to perform at higher levels, regardless of their starting point. The belief and expectation that all students can achieve grade level standards, with the appropriate support, significantly impact their motivation, engagement, and academic outcomes (Li, 2023). Further, studies reinforce the importance of teacher expectations in enhancing student achievement, particularly for students from diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds.

3.4 Employ differentiated instruction and universal design strategies: Recognizing and adjusting to the individual learning paces of students is essential for effective teaching. The principles of differentiated instruction (DI) and universal design for learning (UDL) encourage design that recognizes the diversity of learners, including the different paces at which students are working, and the different levels at which material should be taught (CAST, n.d.; Stapleton-Corcoran, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017). Pacing is a critical aspect of the teaching and learning characteristics of all classrooms and can promote inclusion.

Finding 4. A trend analysis shows that participation in RISE is highly correlated to elementary and secondary program pathways, which can shape access to postsecondary education.

Another prominent theme to emerge from the data is the relationship between RISE and secondary school programs. As established in the literature, students' access to or enrolment in particular courses or programs holds a very strong relationship to postsecondary outcomes (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023; Parekh, 2013). As researchers, we often employ access to postsecondary education as a measurable outcome as postsecondary participation has been demonstrated to be critical to students' future economic independence, employment, and long-term health (Ballingall, 2015; Fonseca & Zheng, 2011; Irwin, 2015; Kearney et al., 2015). Additionally, in Canada, employers are increasingly requiring employees to have some postsecondary education (Government of Canada, 2017). From our interviews with educators and administrators, a recurrent theme was the frequency in which students in the RISE program subsequently pursued secondary school courses at the Locally Developed level or through the My Achievement Pathway to Success (MAPS) program, and occasionally the Skills to Enhance Personal Success (STEPS) program. The implications related to modifying students' curricular expectations and pathways was a considerable concern for some parents. As one parent shared, *"I was definitely hesitant about making any modifications or accommodations specifically because I know it's very hard to get that off of their record after they start to move up or if they start to improve, or at least that was the information that I had been given from other parents that it was very hard to reverse that once it had started. That's just the way you're going to go forever"* (Parent feedback).

Several educators and administrators described their role in supporting students and families in their pathway decisions. Many felt that they were responsible for determining the "best fit" for students' secondary programming. Several participating educators and administrators noted that should students be aiming for a diploma-granting program, it was critically important that they leave RISE at Grades 7 and 8 and return to a full-time placement in their homeroom. Participants shared that if students remained in RISE for Grade 8, many would transition into the non-diploma MAPS program in high school.

Based on the importance of leaving RISE for Grades 7 and 8, those conversations and decisions were often initiated years before the transition to secondary school. As such, decisions related to pathways towards a diploma or certificate, and, in many cases, access to postsecondary education, were decided early. Some educators expressed discomfort with this role of providing guidance for secondary school and beyond. As one educator expressed, *"I think our job is just to educate. Our job is to educate and not have a crystal ball and our job is to take a student from where they're at and move them forward"* (Educator feedback). Additionally, there were considerable conflicting perspectives on whether it was best to advocate that students pursue a more challenging secondary school pathway with the option to drop to a more manageable level or begin their high school experience with fewer academic demands and move up should they be successful. There were concerns also about some unknowns related to the implications of elementary decisions in relation to the secondary school system.

To better understand the relationship between RISE and secondary pathways, we explored students' secondary pathways using students' enrolment status in RISE in both Grade 6 and Grade 8. We wanted to establish the degree to which students left RISE following Grade 6 and entered the regular program before heading to secondary school.

> **Finding 5. Approximately one-fifth of students entering RISE left and returned to the regular class before the end of Grade 8.**

Leaving RISE in Grades 7 and 8 was raised by a number of participants as critical to facilitating students' access to an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) and, ultimately, access to college or university. Based on data from Grade 12 students (as of June 2023), of students who were in RISE in June of Grade 6, 75.3% continued and were present in RISE in June of Grade 8, with 21% of students having left RISE and entering the regular program. As the majority of students remained in RISE for Grade 8, it made sense to follow their trajectories through secondary school based on their status in Grade 8. The proportion of students leaving RISE and returning to the homeroom between the end of Grade 6 and end of Grade 8 was approximately 21% with roughly half (10%) leaving between October and June of Grade 8.

Recommendation:

5.1 Track and share program and pathway information with families: It's important that trajectory information be shared with families to establish expectations.

For further context related to postsecondary education, the vast majority of Canadian university programs will require a Grade 12 University ("U") level English course with many programs in STEM requiring Grade 12 "'U"' level Math. Other postsecondary programs may accept Mixed and/or College level English and Math courses, and some may accept the completion of an OSSD. Recent research has shown that even though students may be pursuing postsecondary pathways in secondary school, students pursuing the Applied/College pathway encounter barriers to postsecondary education (Parekh, 2013). Newer research shows how students' futures are deeply linked to course selection in Grade 12 (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). According to Gallagher-Mackay et al.'s (2023) report, students with disabilities were particularly disadvantaged in accessing key University-preparatory Grade 12 courses.

While upper-year course selection, particularly Grade 12, is of tremendous importance in accessing postsecondary education, enrolment in Grade 12 courses is closely related to Grade 9 course selection. Research has long evidenced that taking the majority of courses at the Academic level in Grades 9 and 10 is a critical predictor for postsecondary access (Parekh & Brown, 2019; Parekh et al., 2020). Despite potential options to shift pathways in high school, once academic levels are established, they have been shown to be largely fixed. Drawing on data from Ontario, only 41% of students who pursued the Applied Math in Grade 9 confirmed admission to a PSE institution compared to just 16% of students who took Math in either Locally Developed or an unspecified course level (Quan & James, 2017). An earlier study from the Toronto District School Board also showed that only 2.6% of students taking the majority of their courses at the Workplace level in Grades 11-12 went on to confirm an offer to postsecondary education (college or university) (Parekh, 2013).

Of students in the GECDSB who took Grade 9 Academic English,[2] 78% went on to take University level English in Grade 12, with 22% pursuing a College level English credit. The vast majority of students (87%) taking an Applied English course in Grade 9 largely went on to take College level English in Grade 12. Of students pursuing Grade 9 English at the Locally Developed level, 60% went on to take a Grade 12 English course at the College level, with 36% at the Workplace level. The relationship between Grade 9 and Grade 12 English courses is fairly direct for the Academic-University pathway and Applied-College pathway. However, students pursuing the Locally Developed level in Grade 9 appear to have options between Grade 12 College and Workplace English courses, but were unlikely to pursue Grade 12 University English, a key course for both college and university access (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023). Students pursuing Locally Developed Grade 9 English courses were most likely to pursue either College or Workplace level English in Grade 12.

Figure 5. Relationship between Grade 9 & 12 English Courses, first and last taken, Student Information System, Grade 12 students (June 2023)
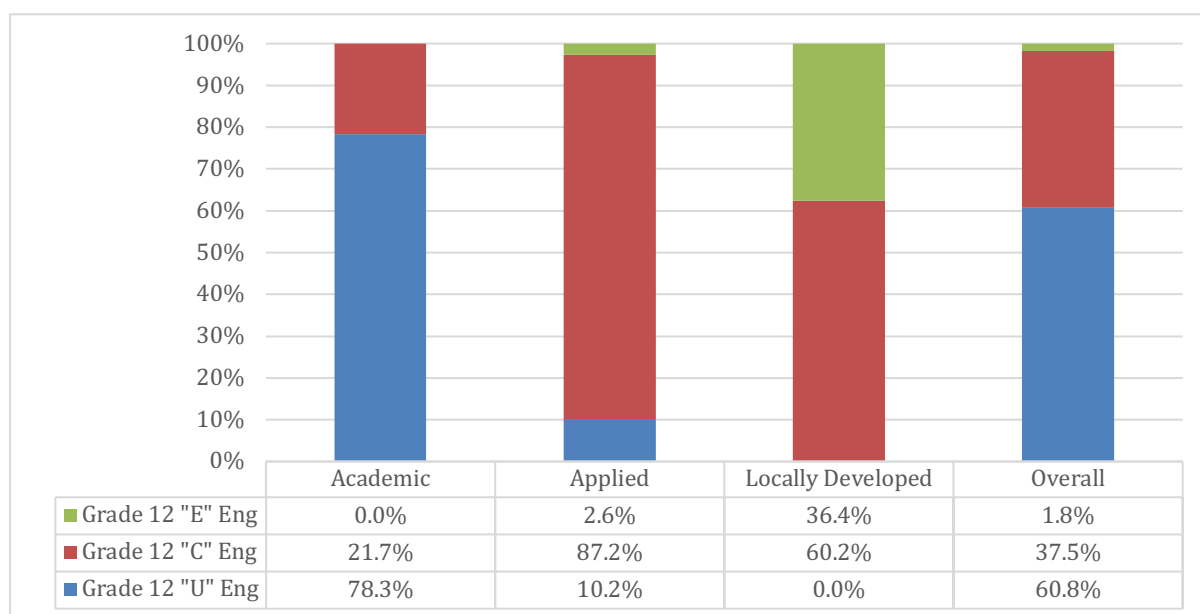
	Academic	Applied	Locally Developed	Overall
■ Grade 12 "E" Eng	0.0%	2.6%	36.4%	1.8%
■ Grade 12 "C" Eng	21.7%	87.2%	60.2%	37.5%
■ Grade 12 "U" Eng	78.3%	10.2%	0.0%	60.8%

Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding. Proportions of students taking ESL/ELD courses were not included in the figure above.

The majority of students who took Academic Math in Grade 9 went on to pursue University level Math in Grade 11 or 12 (69.5%).[3] For students taking Applied Math in Grade 9, three quarters (74%) went on to take Math at the College level in Grade 11 or 12. Where the trajectories between English and Math courses differ is for students pursuing Locally Developed Math in

---

[2] Please note that only students who had both a Grade 9 and Grade 12 English credit were included in this analysis.
[3] Please note that only a senior level credit in Mathematics is required for graduation, and only students who took a Grade 9 and Grade 11 or 12 Mathematics credit were included in this analysis.

Grade 9 as they were much more likely to pursue Workplace level Math in Grade 11 or 12 (79%), compared to just over a third (36%) of students who pursued Workplace English in Grade 12.

Figure 6. Relationship between Grade 9 & 11/12 Math Courses, first and last taken, Student Information System, Grade 12 students (June 2023)

	Academic	Applied	Locally Developed	Overall
■ Grade 11/12 "E" Math	1.3%	18.3%	78.7%	14.2%
■ Grade 11/12 "M" Math	4.4%	3.1%	0.0%	3.7%
■ Grade 11/12 "C" Math	24.7%	74.4%	16.2%	35.7%
■ Grade 11/12 "U" Math	69.5%	4.2%	4.5%	46.4%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding. Proportions of students taking de-streamed courses were not included in the figure above due to timing of implementation.
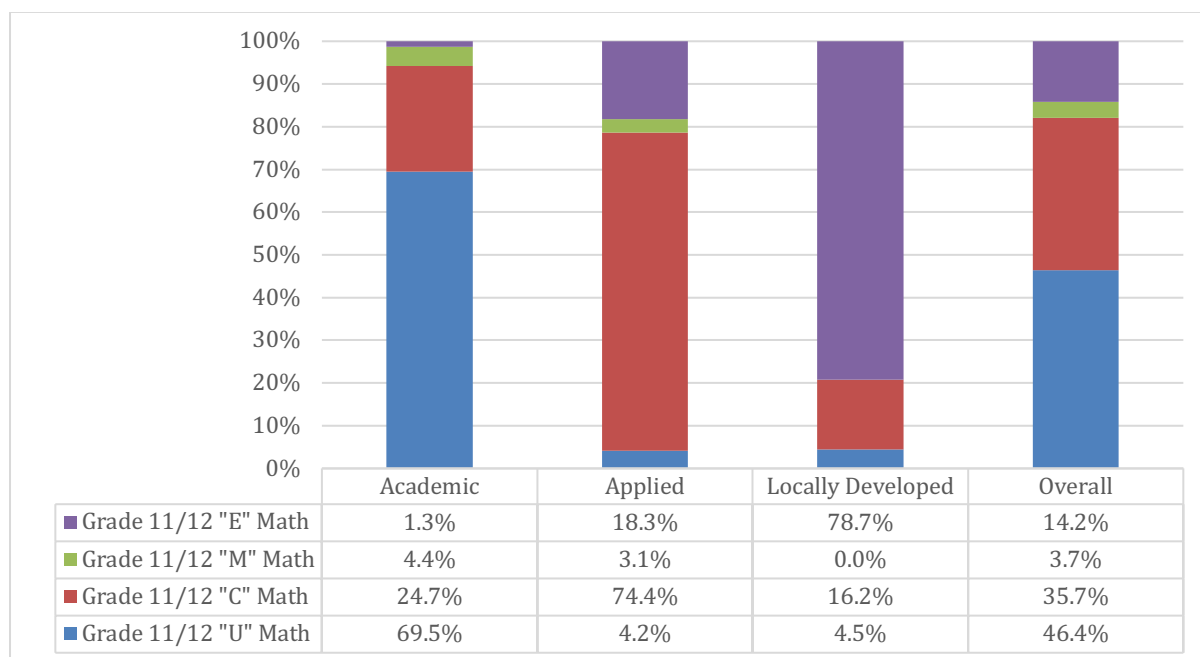
Further, we explored the relationship between students involved in special education, particularly in relation to RISE, and academic pathways. Drawing on data from Grade 12 students (June 2023), we were able to explore transition trends for students as they entered Grade 9 across a variety of special education categories and settings. Note that we reported students' special education status as of Grade 8, meaning if they were in RISE in Grade 8, they were included in the following analyses.

To capture where students first "landed" once they entered high school, we explored the level of courses students took and completed (successfully or not) when they first entered Grade 9 for both English and Math. For context, since 2021, the provincial government has collapsed Grade 9 "Academic" and "Applied" courses into a single "de-streamed" course. However, for many students who were in Grade 12 in 2023, they would have been in Grade 9 over the 2019-2020 school year and would have had the option of Grade 9 Academic, Applied, or Locally Developed instead of the current option of de-streamed and Locally Developed. We do not have data on how the de-streamed program may have altered students' pathways.

Figure 7. First Grade 9 English Course to be completed across programs, Student Information System, Students in Grade 12 (2022-2023)

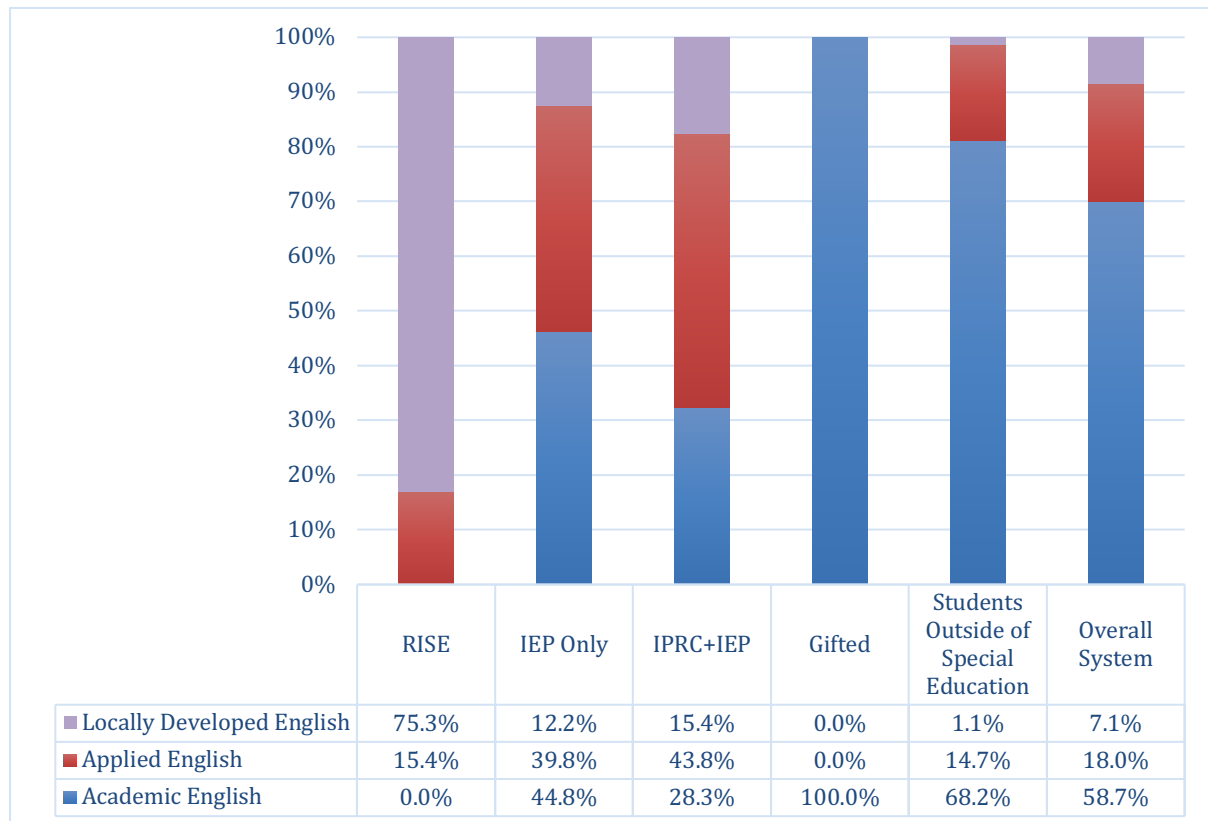|	RISE	IEP Only	IPRC+IEP	Gifted	Students Outside of Special Education	Overall System
Locally Developed English	75.3%	12.2%	15.4%	0.0%	1.1%	7.1%
Applied English	15.4%	39.8%	43.8%	0.0%	14.7%	18.0%
Academic English	0.0%	44.8%	28.3%	100.0%	68.2%	58.7%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding. Proportions of students taking ESL/ELD courses were not included in the figure above. There were no students enrolled in RISE that went on to take Grade 9 English in ESL/ELD.

Of the three levels of English courses shown above (Academic, Applied, Locally Developed), 59% of students overall took their Grade 9 English course at the Academic level with 18% in Applied and 7% in Locally Developed. Aside from students identified as gifted, students involved in special education were less likely to take their Grade 9 English course at the Academic level (less than half [45%] for students who only had an IEP and less than a third [28%] for students who had been formally identified with an exceptionality). Three quarters of students in RISE (75%) took their Grade 9 English course at the Locally Developed level, with 15% at the Applied level.
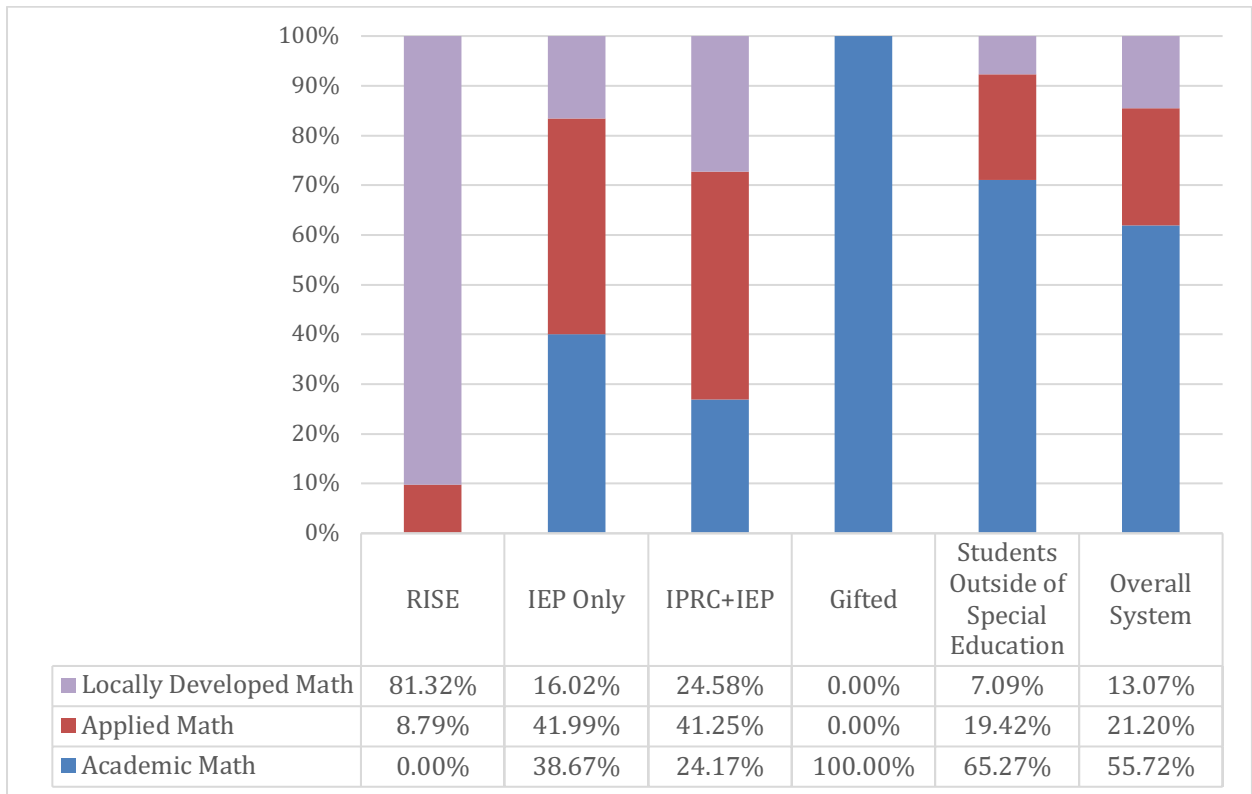
Figure 8. First Grade 9 Math course to be completed across programs, Student Information System, Students in Grade 12 (2022-2023)

	RISE	IEP Only	IPRC+IEP	Gifted	Students Outside of Special Education	Overall System
■ Locally Developed Math	81.32%	16.02%	24.58%	0.00%	7.09%	13.07%
■ Applied Math	8.79%	41.99%	41.25%	0.00%	19.42%	21.20%
■ Academic Math	0.00%	38.67%	24.17%	100.00%	65.27%	55.72%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding. Proportions of students taking de-streamed courses were not included in the figure above due to timing of implementation.

Similar patterns existed for students' first Grade 9 Mathematics courses (completed). Overall, more than half (56%) of students took Grade 9 Academic Math, with 21% took Applied and 13% took Locally Developed. The proportion of students leaving RISE and electing Locally Developed Math rose to 81% in contrast to Grade 9 Locally Developed English (75%).

Figure 9. Entry into MAPS/STEPS, Student Information System, Students in Grade 12 (2022-2023)
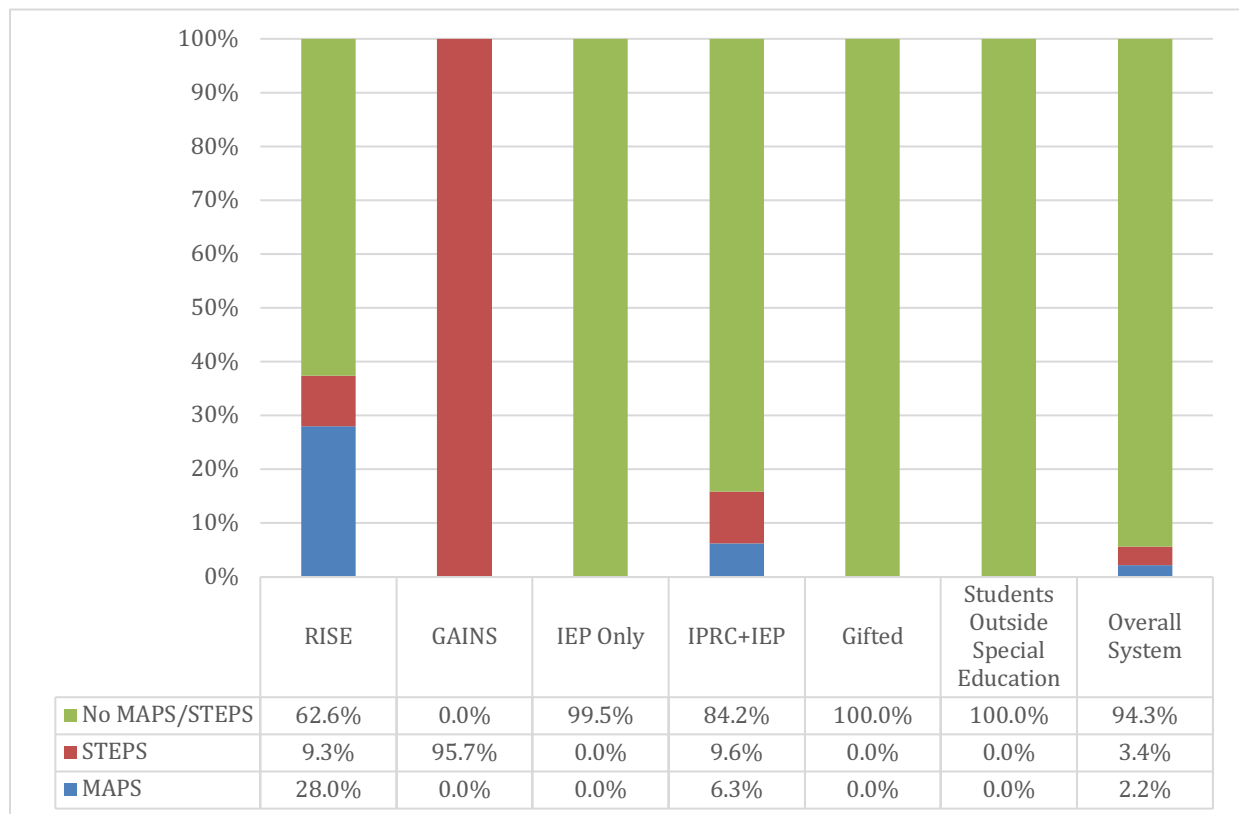
	RISE	GAINS	IEP Only	IPRC+IEP	Gifted	Students Outside Special Education	Overall System
■ No MAPS/STEPS	62.6%	0.0%	99.5%	84.2%	100.0%	100.0%	94.3%
■ STEPS	9.3%	95.7%	0.0%	9.6%	0.0%	0.0%	3.4%
■ MAPS	28.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

The GECDSB offers fully self-contained special education programs in high school: the My Achievement Pathway to Success (MAPS)[4] program and the Skills to Enhance Personal Success (STEPS)[5] program. In terms of students' pathways through school, both MAPS and STEPS appear to closely connect to the RISE and GAINS programs in elementary school. For instance, 96% of students in GAINS went onto the STEPS program in high school. For students in RISE, the trajectory was more variable with close to two-thirds (63%) going into the regular program for Grade 9, 28% into MAPS, and 9.3% into STEPS. In terms of the overall system, students in STEPS accounted for 3.4% of the student population, and RISE for 2.2%.

[4] https://www.publicboard.ca/en/programs-and-learning/resources/Documents/GECDSB-Parent-Guide-to-MAPS.pdf

[5] https://www.publicboard.ca/en/programs-and-learning/resources/Documents/GECDSB-Parent-Guide-to-STEPS.pdf

Figure 10. Graduation Status across Program, Student Information System, Students in Grade 12 (2022-2023)

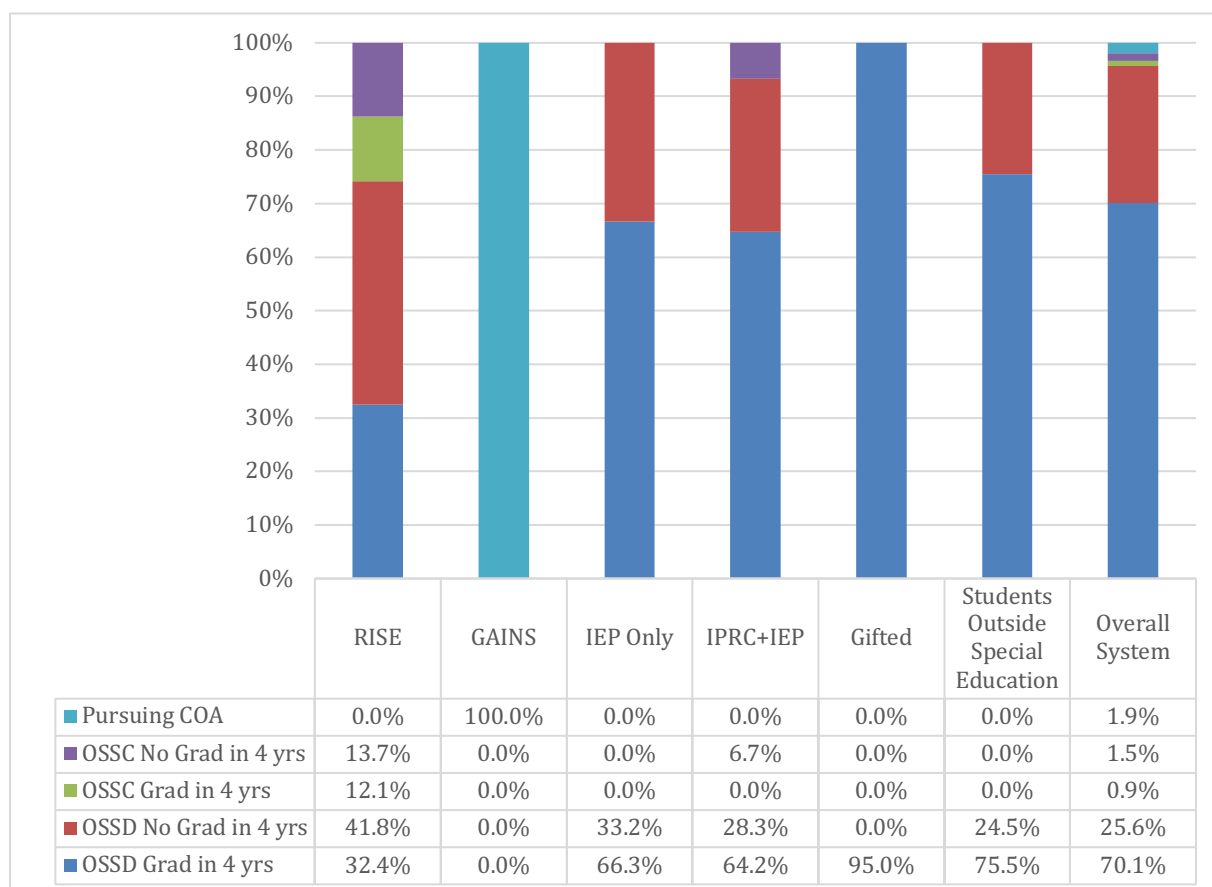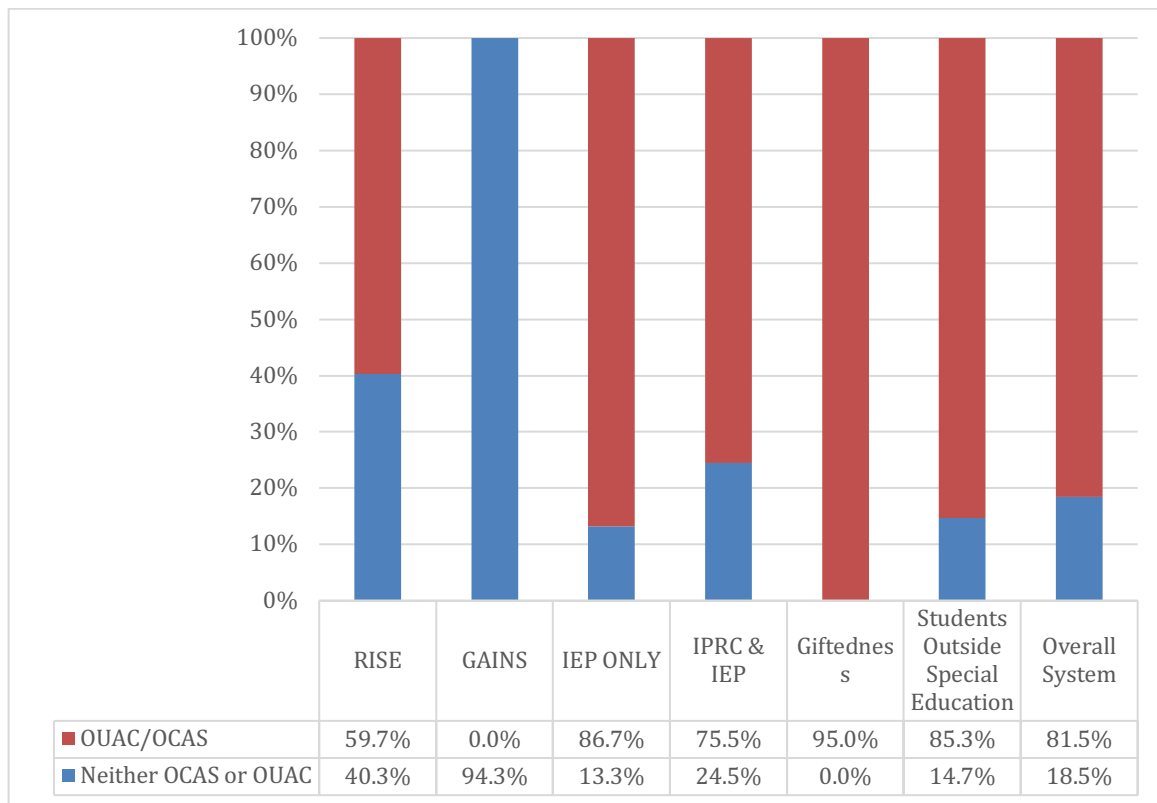|	RISE	GAINS	IEP Only	IPRC+IEP	Gifted	Students Outside Special Education	Overall System
■ Pursuing COA	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%
■ OSSC No Grad in 4 yrs	13.7%	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%	1.5%
■ OSSC Grad in 4 yrs	12.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%
■ OSSD No Grad in 4 yrs	41.8%	0.0%	33.2%	28.3%	0.0%	24.5%	25.6%
■ OSSD Grad in 4 yrs	32.4%	0.0%	66.3%	64.2%	95.0%	75.5%	70.1%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Drawing on Grade 12 student data (2022-2023 school year), we were able to explore graduation trends related to student programs and special education categories.[6] For graduation rates, we opted to employ the measure of graduation in four years, either with an OSSD or OSSC, as that particular timeframe indicates meeting the graduation milestone 'on time'. Many students will take a fifth year to complete the program, or up to seven years if permitted through special education. As such, most students will eventually graduate. Therefore, to construct a milestone indicative of moving through the system 'as expected', we opted to explore graduation rates after four years. For the overall system, the OSSD graduation rate in four years was 70% (note that the 2022 five-year OSSD graduation rate for GECDSB was 85%) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024). Students who had an IEP, including those both informally and formally identified, had similar graduation rates, within 6% of the overall system (66% and 64%, respectively). OSSD graduation rates for students in RISE were less than half of the system rates (32%), with 12% graduating with an OSSC.

---

[6] Please note the identified graduation rates are based only on the students enrolled as of June 2023 at a four-year graduation timeframe. Here, we've applied a different metric than the Ministry of Education typically reports.

Figure 11. Intention to apply to Postsecondary Education, Student Information System, Students in Grade 12 (2022-2023)

	RISE	GAINS	IEP ONLY	IPRC & IEP	Giftedness	Students Outside Special Education	Overall System
■ OUAC/OCAS	59.7%	0.0%	86.7%	75.5%	95.0%	85.3%	81.5%
■ Neither OCAS or OUAC	40.3%	94.3%	13.3%	24.5%	0.0%	14.7%	18.5%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Drawing on whether there was an indication that students' information should be shared with the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) and/or the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS), we were able to observe postgraduation trends. From the overall system, 81.5% of students had their information flagged for sharing with OUAC/OCAS. Interestingly, combining OCAS and OUAC, students who have not gone through an IPRC but have an IEP (86.7%) were more likely to have a flag to share information with OUAC/OCAS than overall system trends (81.5%). For students who have been formally identified through an IPRC, their rates were slightly lower at 75.5%. For students in RISE, 59.7% had an indication to share information with OUAC/OCAS, however, they were more than twice as likely (40.3%) to not indicate an intention to apply to postsecondary education compared to the overall system trend (18.5%).

> **Finding 7. Students in RISE were far more likely to pursue courses and programs that have more limited opportunities to complete an OSSD as well as access to postsecondary education.**

Compared to students both inside and outside special education, students in RISE were the most likely to pursue Locally Developed English and Math courses in Grade 9. Students in RISE were the most likely to enter the MAPS program, pursue an OSSC program, the least likely to graduate with an OSSD in four years, and, with the exception of students in GAINS, were the least likely to

have their information flagged for OUAC/OCAS. Over half of students (63%) in RISE entering high school were pursuing an OSSD with similar proportions (60%) flagged to apply to postsecondary education (university and/or college).

Recommendations:

7.1 Ensure access to guidance counsellors with high expectations and knowledge of elementary/secondary/postsecondary pathways: Ensure students have support from guidance counsellors who have access to trajectory information, and who will hold high expectations for students' academic achievements and future academic pursuits.

7.2 Encourage and support students to pursue more challenging pathways: Encourage students to challenge themselves at higher level courses, with the risk of lower grades, to enable further options post-high school. Research shows that, in terms of access to postsecondary education, program/course level often plays a bigger role than grades (Brown et al., 2016).
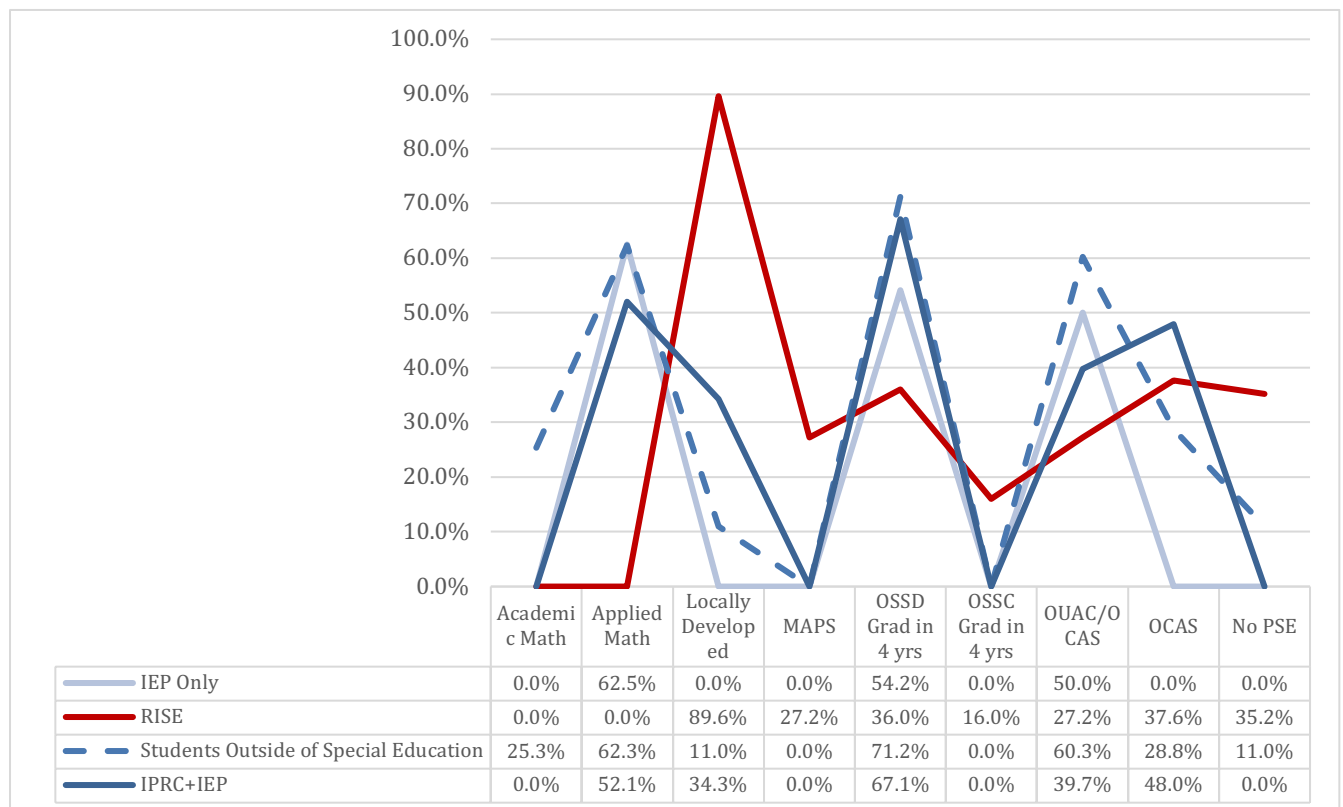
7.3 When planning for students' programs and pathways, consider the implications for students' future access to postsecondary education: When choosing programs, supports, or approaches to intervention, consider and pursue options that leave students with as many choices as possible for their postsecondary education.

EXAMINING PATHWAYS WHILE CONTROLLING FOR ACHIEVEMENT

One of the primary factors involved in organizing students across special education and academic placements, settings, programs, and courses is the perception of student ability and their capacity to be successful within a particular environment. However, the learning conditions students encounter in school can also play an important role in shaping students' academic trajectories. To examine this interplay further, we explored student pathways by first controlling for student achievement, as determined through students' Grade 6 Math EQAO scores, and then investigating any potential relationship between program, placement and student pathways. Due to low numbers, the only category in which there were enough students to safely report were students who were deemed eligible to participate in the assessment (e.g. not exempt) and who had scored a level 1 or below.

Figure 12 includes the proportion of students who took Grade 9 Mathematics courses (across three academic levels); the proportion of students who participated in MAPS and who graduated with an OSSD and OSSC in four years; as well as the proportion of students flagged as intending to apply to postsecondary education for all students who scored a level 1 or below on their Grade 6 EQAO Mathematics assessment. Important to note that not all students in RISE have taken the EQAO Mathematics assessment for possible reasons such as exemption, deferral, and absenteeism.

Figure 12. Trajectories of RISE for students achieving level 1 or below Grade 6 EQAO Math, Student Information System, June 2023

	Academic Math	Applied Math	Locally Developed	MAPS	OSSD Grad in 4 yrs	OSSC Grad in 4 yrs	OUAC/OCAS	OCAS	No PSE
IEP Only	0.0%	62.5%	0.0%	0.0%	54.2%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%
RISE	0.0%	0.0%	89.6%	27.2%	36.0%	16.0%	27.2%	37.6%	35.2%
Students Outside of Special Education	25.3%	62.3%	11.0%	0.0%	71.2%	0.0%	60.3%	28.8%	11.0%
IPRC+IEP	0.0%	52.1%	34.3%	0.0%	67.1%	0.0%	39.7%	48.0%	0.0%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and included as "'0.'" As several reports have been merged for this figure, neither columns nor rows will add to 100%.

Although granularity is challenging due to low counts, it is notable that 25.3% of students who scored a level 1 or below on their Grade 6 EQAO Math assessment, and were not involved in special education, ended up taking Academic level Math in Grade 9. With the exception of students in RISE, over half of all similarly achieving students across special education categories (and outside special education) took their Grade 9 Math course at the Applied level (52.1-62.5%). The vast majority of students in RISE, who took the Grade 6 EQAO Math assessment and scored a level 1 or below, took their Grade 9 Math course at the Locally Developed level. Interestingly, similarly achieving students in Math, who had a formal identification through IPRC (34.3%) and students outside special education (11%), were far less likely to enrol in Locally Developed courses. Unlike other groups, 27.2% of students in RISE who scored a level 1 or below went onto MAPS. Other groups either did not or there were so few who went on that they were unable to be reported. Despite similar levels of achievement, students in RISE were the least likely to graduate with an OSSD (36%) and the most likely to graduate with an OSSC (16%) within four years. For this analysis, note that no other groups graduated with an OSSC (or there were so few that they were unable to be reported). Similarly achieving students outside of special education graduated with an OSSD at a rate of 71.2%. Lastly, across similarly achieving students, students in RISE were the most likely to *not* have their information shared with OUAC/OCAS (35.2%), suggesting limited access to postsecondary education.

Finding 8. Even when controlling for achievement, participation in RISE is related to greater barriers for students' secondary and postsecondary options.

Even with the identified limitations, when we controlled for achievement, students in RISE were more likely to pursue pathways with known barriers for future access to postsecondary opportunities. All students captured in Figure 12 had similar levels of achievement in Math, yet had notably different trajectories through school with students in RISE being, by far, the most likely to pursue Locally Developed Math courses in Grade 9, MAPS, and an OSSC. They were also three times as likely than students outside of special education to not indicate any intention to apply to postsecondary education.

Recommendation:

8.1 Investigate and remove potential barriers: This analysis was limited due to low counts, its specific focus on Math, and learners scoring level 1 or below. However, there is enough evidence here to motivate further investigation as to whether there are potential barriers within the structure of RISE that might limit students' access to high school courses and programs, inadvertently disabling their future access to postsecondary education. For further information on a similarly structured study from the TDSB, please see Parekh and Brown (2019).

RISE AND THE WORK OF FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

Finding 9. RISE perceived as "only option" for support.

Many participants shared that once students were enrolled in RISE, the RISE teacher became largely responsible for all aspects of their learning. There was some inconsistency across interviews in terms of access to support from Educational Assistants, Child and Youth Workers, and Learning Support Teachers. For example, some RISE educators had access to an EA, sometimes through Jordan's Principle, or had access to support from the school's CYW and LST, while others shared that they had no access to any of these supports. Many shared that students or educators could not "double-dip" support. For instance, one participant shared, "*Yes, I have one that probably could have utilized ESL. We don't have ESL at our school, and we don't really have access to an ESL itinerant. He's been in RISE because that's where he's going to get the most bang for his buck while he's at school. You can't double-dip the buckets*" (Educator feedback). The idea that this was somehow "taking too much," misses the issue that many students would benefit from the different supports available, and that each of these supports has unique contributions to learning.

Outside of RISE, there is a scarcity of alternative support within the school system that caters to the unique needs of students with IEPs or who have been assessed as at least two grade levels behind their peers. At a systems level, there is significant reliance on the RISE program as the source of specialized educational support, making it an indispensable component of the current system.

This heavy reliance on the RISE program for specialized support raises concerns about the diversity of options available to families and students. For instance, participants in RISE are often not eligible for other types of support, such as educational assistants or English as a Second Language supports. While the program's structure is intended to offer substantial benefits, the characterization of it as "the only option" suggests a need for a broader array of support mechanisms that can accommodate all students.

RISE educators, too, felt like they were the students' "only option" for support. Some educators shared how, once they took on the RISE position, it was assumed that they were now the students' entire system of support. *"I find a lot of my kids, they may have support staff, and then as soon as they start with me, I am the support. I'm like okay, but what about the other three periods of the day where they can't read, but they still have to do the social studies, the science, the whatever else. Their organization skills aren't on par, yet they're expected to do Grade7 and 8 rotary, just like they're in high school. There's a little disconnect there. They still get speech, they still get OT, they still get PT, any of those kinds of things. For the most part, unless there's a major safety concern, that's it…I'm it. Even sometimes with a major safety concern, if I'm a fix, I'm still it"* (Educator feedback).

From interviews with RISE educators, once students were placed in RISE, there was a palpable decrease in shared responsibility within the school for students' education. It's important that when students enter a program like RISE that they continue to be supported and valued as a member of the school community, where all staff share responsibility for their academic and social success. Ongoing shared responsibility for students also supports both RISE and homeroom educators as well as promotes more collaborative practice within the school.

Recommendations:

9.1 Diversify support Options: The board should endeavour to expand the range of support options available to students accessing special education beyond the RISE program. This expansion could include the development of other models for delivering specialized services, and better access to support services within mainstream classrooms, and the provision of external resources and interventions that are culturally responsive and academically rigorous.

9.2 Engage families in the decision-making process: To address concerns about the RISE program being advertised as "the only option," the board should actively involve families in the decision-making process regarding the support their children receive and provide a range of viable options. Families should have access to all information needed to make informed choices that best meet their children's educational needs.

9.3 Improve support and recognition for RISE educators: Enhancing support and recognition for the unique challenges and contributions of RISE educators can improve job satisfaction and retention. Studies have shown that recognition and support are key factors in teacher retention, particularly in specialized educational settings (Shuls & Flores, 2020). Implementing a comprehensive support system for RISE educators, including access to resources, professional collaboration opportunities, and mental health support can ensure that the role is desirable and sustainable for teachers.

9.4 Foster a community of practice: Creating a supportive community among RISE educators encourages collaboration, reduces feelings of isolation, and promotes shared learning and problem-solving. Research highlights the value of communities of practice in fostering professional identity and commitment. Establish regular meetings and forums for RISE educators, and other teaching colleagues, to share experiences, strategies, and challenges, fostering a sense of community and collective purpose.

9.5 Value the roles of all educators in the system: Educators in RISE would benefit from additional support and community. Recognizing educational assistants, and other support staff in the building as essential to the school operations, will ensure that both RISE and regular classrooms are staffed for the benefit of students.

> **Finding 10. Families are engaging in extensive labour and are connecting to external services to support their children.**

When considering the academic outcomes of RISE, it is important to also acknowledge the commitment families of participating children invest in their child(ren)'s academic and emotional development at home. Many families reported spending considerable time and resources on external services, such as private tutors and therapies, to complement the education their child(ren) receive in RISE. Furthermore, some parents have undertaken training in literacy and learning disability programs to better assist their child(ren) with school-related tasks and academic learning at home. This level of parental involvement underscores the complexities of assessing the direct impact of the RISE program (and intervention programs generally) on students' learning outcomes, given the concurrent contribution of external support and parental engagement. Substantial research has been done on equity concerns that arise in school perceptions of parental involvement (Flores & Kyere, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2014)

The dedication of families to enhancing their children's academic skills through additional outside resources points to the perceived need for more intensive support than what is provided within the RISE program alone. It is common that parents' contributions are unrecognized in educational environments (Underwood et al., 2020). The varied sources of support highlight a collaborative yet complex ecosystem surrounding the academic development of students in RISE, where the program's impact is interwoven with external educational efforts initiated by families. However, attention to equity and discrimination in the perception of parent contributions is also critical.

Recommendations:

10.1 Engage families as partners in the care and education of children: Engaging families as active partners in their children's education has been consistently shown to enhance academic outcomes. A partnership approach ensures that educational strategies are reinforced at home, creating a consistent and supportive learning environment for students. However, parent engagement should not be expected in lieu of school support.

10.2 A greater emphasis on sharing assessment information, and the potential pathways from RISE is needed: Research demonstrates that strong family engagement in education significantly contributes to student success (DeMatthews et al., 2020). This can take the form of involving families in the creation of IEPs, continuing parent communication, and offering resources for families to support their child's education. Power differences between school and parents should be acknowledged and considered in this communication.

RISE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS

Finding 11. Partially integrated, partially segregated – RISE as a safe space.

A partially integrated placement requires that students are in a self-contained special education classroom for "at least 50% of the day" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2023). While enabling targeted educational approaches and more individual interactions with a special education teacher, this partially integrated structure introduces other significant challenges that affect the program's inclusivity and accessibility. The RISE's structure, coupled with the program's visibility within the school, can contribute to a stigma surrounding its participants. This stigma not only affects students' social interactions, but also raises concerns about their future educational trajectories. There was some fear among students and families that enrolment in RISE could signal limited academic and professional prospects, further marginalizing these students within and beyond the school context. Important to note that many educators, administrators, students, and parents spoke about how students experience disability-related stigma, name-calling, and bullying resulting in anxious feelings, withdrawal, disengagement, and other negative experiences. Educators noted that disability-related discrimination was pervasive with no systemic strategy to address it.

Educators widely reported that the RISE program served as a "safe space" for students, free from stigma and judgment. They shared that the RISE environment enabled students to be themselves and be in proximity to peers who could relate to their experiences of feeling "different" within the school context. Educators reported that the program's role in offering protection from the trauma associated with struggling in regular classrooms and the negative social judgments that can accompany learning difficulties.

However, this perception of RISE as a safe and supportive environment was not uniformly shared by parents and students. Although many, but not all, students felt that RISE teachers were more attuned to their emotional support needs than homeroom teachers, they discussed safety concerns both within and outside of the RISE room, where bullying and at times aggressive behaviours were observed in various school settings. Anti-disability discrimination and ableism can happen anywhere in schools and this can affect both social and academic success for RISE students.

Recommendations:

11.1 Promote inclusive practices: Alongside the diversification of support options, the board should promote inclusive educational practices that allow the integration of special education support into regular classrooms. Beyond the confines of the RISE program, work should be done

towards fostering a school-wide culture of inclusivity and acceptance. Initiatives could include peer mentorship programs, awareness campaigns about diverse learning needs, and professional development for all staff on inclusive practices. Evidence suggests that such whole-school approaches can reduce stigma and create more supportive environments for disabled students (Gregory & Nichols, 2018).

11.2. Identify and address incidences of disability discrimination: Integrate the issue of ableism and disability discrimination into ongoing equity and professional development activities. Name and address incidences of disability discrimination as they occur in the classroom, school, and school property, and hold all school community members accountable in upholding anti-ableist actions.

11.3 Provide comprehensive training for educators on creating inclusive, trauma-informed safe spaces: The need for schools to be safe, inclusive environments where all students, particularly those with disabilities and diverse backgrounds, can thrive is paramount. Educators play a crucial role in fostering these safe spaces, yet they often require more training and resources to effectively support students facing various challenges, including trauma and discrimination. Partnerships between Education Assistants, Child and Youth Workers, mental health professionals, and other educators can provide students and teachers with ongoing support, and consultations can enhance the school's capacity to respond effectively to students' emotional and psychological needs, contributing to a more supportive school environment.
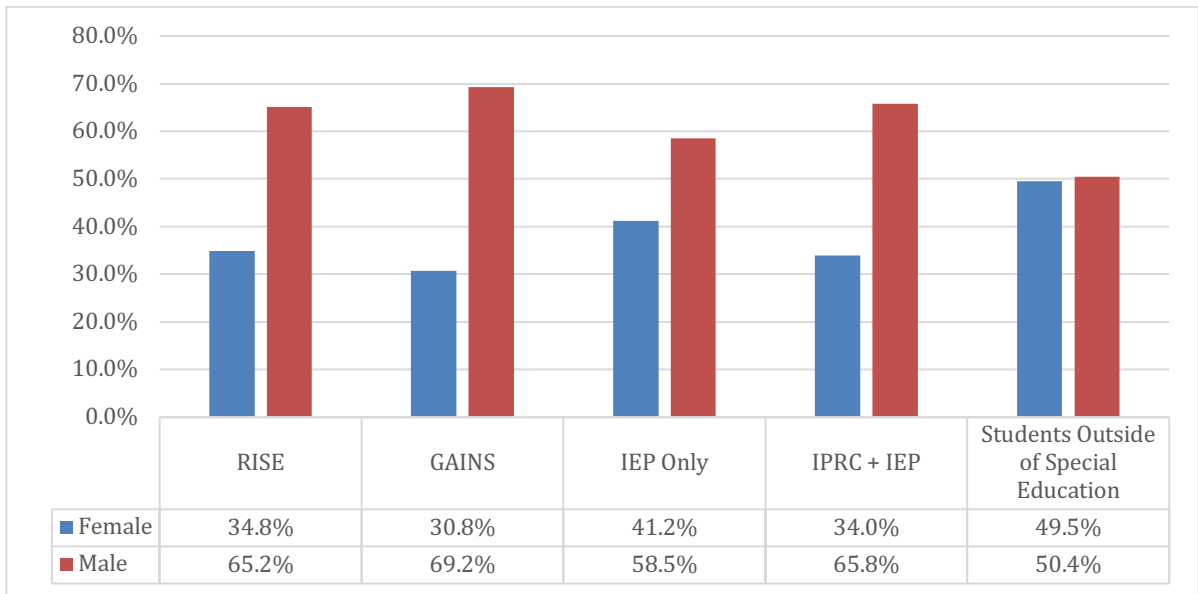
WHO DO THESE STRUCTURES AFFECT? EXAMINING STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) collects data on student identity in a number of ways. Two key approaches are collecting information through registration data and through the Student Census. For generations, research has shown disproportionate representation within special education, which raises questions about the intersecting roles of ableism, racism, classism, and other forms of bias (Artiles, et al. 2010; Brown & Parekh, 2010; Connor, 2017; Domina et al., 2017; Parekh, 2022). As such, it's important to examine who is involved in special education and how.

GENDER

Typically, when examining binary gender representation across special education categories and programs, overall system values typically emerge as a near even split (as seen in the GECDSB). However, male students are consistently overrepresented in special education categories and programs (Brown & Parekh, 2010). This trend is evidenced in both elementary and secondary panels. The closest gender parity is found for students who only have an IEP (no formal identification) with the largest stratification for students participating in GAINS and STEPS where populations are approximately 68-69% male.

Figure 13. Gender across elementary program/setting, Student Information System, as of June 2023

	RISE	GAINS	IEP Only	IPRC + IEP	Students Outside of Special Education
■ Female	34.8%	30.8%	41.2%	34.0%	49.5%
■ Male	65.2%	69.2%	58.5%	65.8%	50.4%

* Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding, and exclusion of "Non-Specific (N)" or "Specified (S)" gender categories due to low numbers. Gifted was also removed due to low counts.

Figure 14. Gender across secondary program/setting, Student Information System, as of June 2023
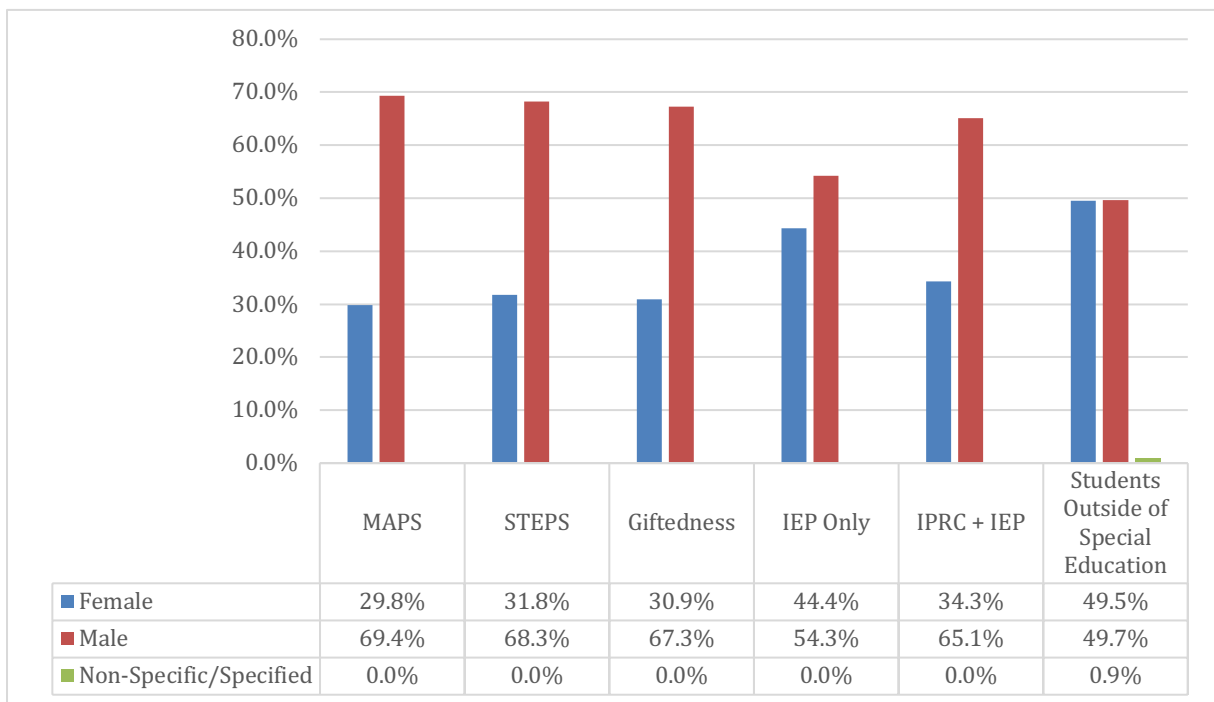
	MAPS	STEPS	Giftedness	IEP Only	IPRC + IEP	Students Outside of Special Education
■ Female	29.8%	31.8%	30.9%	44.4%	34.3%	49.5%
■ Male	69.4%	68.3%	67.3%	54.3%	65.1%	49.7%
■ Non-Specific/Specified	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%

*Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed and columns may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding, due to low numbers we excluded the gender identities "Non-Specific (N)" or "Specified (S)" for most special education categories.

RACE

Students' self-identified racial identity is another important variable to explore, particularly with trends in Western countries of racial disproportionality within special education categories and non-Academic programs (Archer et al., 2018; Artiles et al., 2010; De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). In the GECDSB, racial identity was collected through a recently implemented Student Census (2023). For the elementary panel, the response rate was 19.2%, therefore, when special education categories were broken down by panel and racial identity, there were too few students in some cells to adequately report more program or category-based findings. As such, all special education programs and categories (excluding gifted) were aggregated across elementary and secondary to ensure we had the reportable numbers. Note that across the secondary panel, response rates for the Student Census were 54.5%. Working with the overall proportions across self-identified racial groups, Mixed students were slightly overrepresented within special education, with Indigenous and white students more notably overrepresented. Black students were in line with the board proportion as were the 'Other' group. East Asian, Latin, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Southeast Asian students were underrepresented within special education. Discussions on racial disproportionately are important when thinking about the intersectional experiences of students in special education as well as discussions on access. Racial stereotyping likely plays a role in access to services.

Table 3. Students self-identified racial identity within special education, elementary & secondary, Student Census, 2023

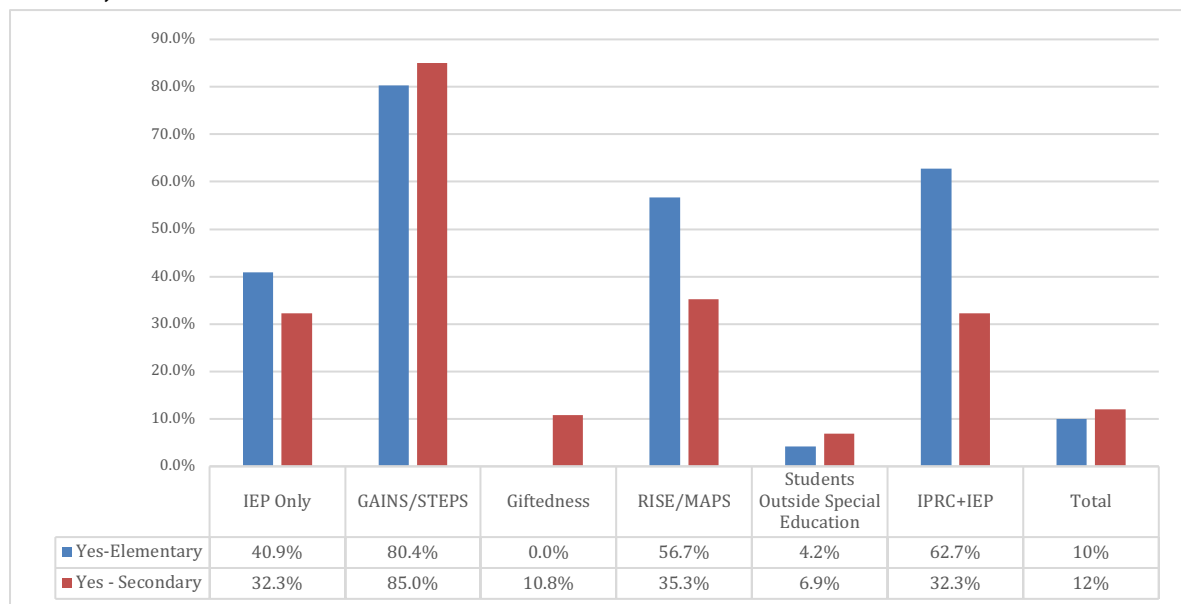|	Black	East Asian	Latin	Middle Eastern	Mixed	Indigenous	Other	South Asian	SE Asian	Not Known	White	Total
Proportion within racial group	15.2%	3.6%	8.5%	7.8%	16.1%	22.0%	16.4%	5.7%	10.2%	21.9%	18.0%	15.0%
Proportion in special education	4.9%	0.8%	1.0%	6.0%	7.9%	1.1%	1.4%	3.4%	1.4%	14.4%	57.7%	100.0%
Overall Proportion	4.9%	3.5%	1.7%	11.6%	7.4%	0.7%	1.3%	8.8%	2.0%	9.9%	48.2%	100%

*Please note that rows may not add to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Although there were not enough students to report all racial groups within the gifted category, it was noted that 60% of students who were identified as gifted were white, approximately a 12% overrepresentation compared to the board total.

DISABILITY

There is quite a bit of discussion on the relationship between disability and the identification of "special education needs" in education. As disability studies scholars, we approach disability from a sociological perspective where what is considered "disability" depends on who is constructing it and how (Underwood, 2009). With the possible exception of giftedness, all students involved in special education have been deemed to require additional support and access to resources to be successful in school. However, there remains a disconnect between how disability is understood within and outside of the field of education. As such, it is interesting to note that of secondary students who have been on an IEP, been through an IPRC and deemed exceptional, or who have attended MAPS in high school, only about a third self-identify as having a disability. These proportions are higher in elementary and higher for students in GAINS/STEPS. Although, as Figure 1 showed, 15.4% of the GECDSB population is involved in special education whereas self-identification of disability ranges between 10% in the elementary panel and 12% in secondary.

Figure 15. Students self-identified disability identity, elementary & secondary, Student Census, 2023

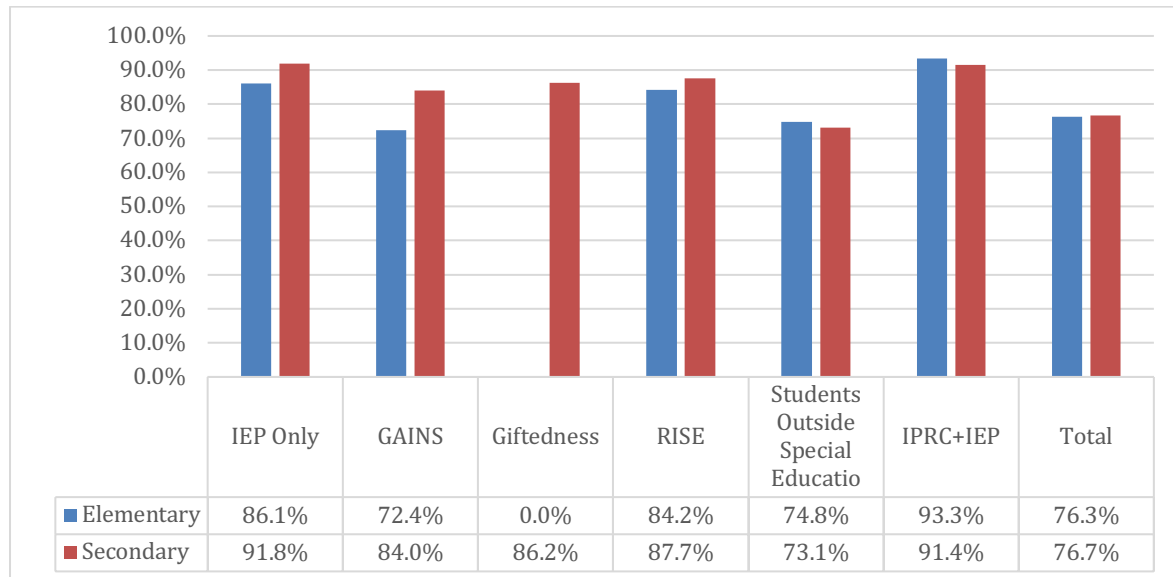|	IEP Only	GAINS/STEPS	Giftedness	RISE/MAPS	Students Outside Special Education	IPRC+IEP	Total
Yes-Elementary	40.9%	80.4%	0.0%	56.7%	4.2%	62.7%	10%
Yes - Secondary	32.3%	85.0%	10.8%	35.3%	6.9%	32.3%	12%

Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed

LANGUAGE

Overall, in the GECDSB, three quarters of students' primary language is English. Interestingly, with the exception of elementary students in GAINS and identified as gifted, all other special education categories have a notable increase in the proportion of students whose primary language is English (up to 93.3% for students who have been formally identified through an IPRC) as compared to the board total.
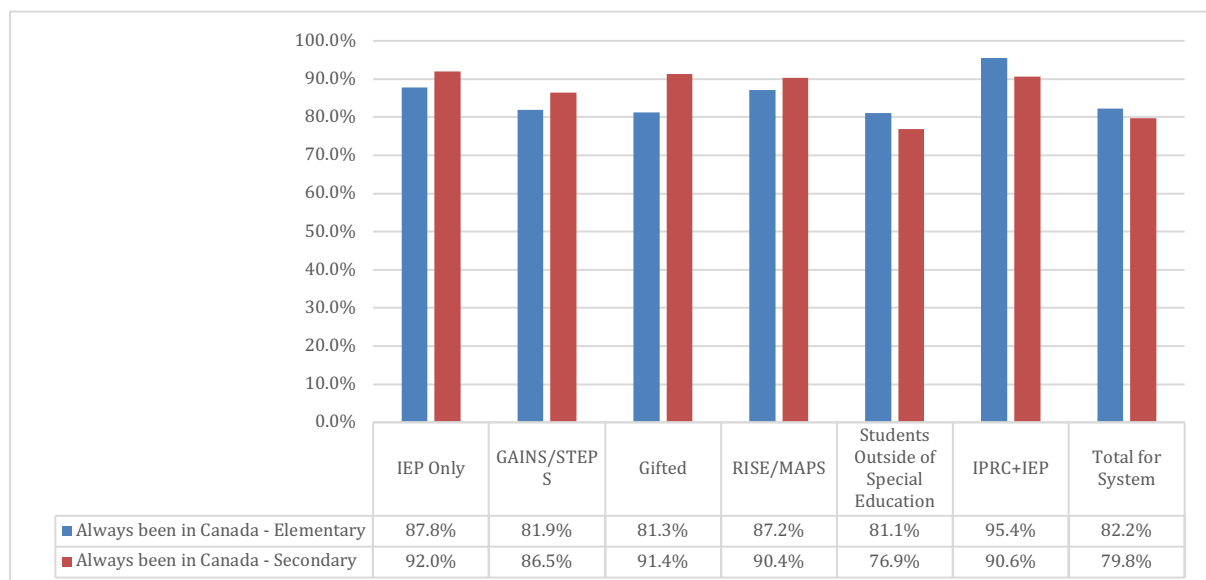
Figure 16. First Language "English," Student Information System, as of June 2023

	IEP Only	GAINS	Giftedness	RISE	Students Outside Special Educatio	IPRC+IEP	Total
■ Elementary	86.1%	72.4%	0.0%	84.2%	74.8%	93.3%	76.3%
■ Secondary	91.8%	84.0%	86.2%	87.7%	73.1%	91.4%	76.7%

Please note that cells with counts below 10 were suppressed

LENGTH OF TIME IN CANADA

Figure 17. Students' length of time in Canada, Student Information System, as of June 2023

	IEP Only	GAINS/STEPS	Gifted	RISE/MAPS	Students Outside of Special Education	IPRC+IEP	Total for System
■ Always been in Canada - Elementary	87.8%	81.9%	81.3%	87.2%	81.1%	95.4%	82.2%
■ Always been in Canada - Secondary	92.0%	86.5%	91.4%	90.4%	76.9%	90.6%	79.8%

Similar to primary language, the system average for students who have always lived in Canada is notably lower than students accessing special education (with the exception of elementary students in GAINS and identified as gifted). This may indicate enhanced access to services and resources for families who are established in Canada and primarily English-speaking.

> **FINDING 12. Overall demographics suggest that students in RISE, and for most identified special education categories, are more likely to be white, male, speak English as a first language and to have always lived in Canada.**

Drawing on both SIS and Census data, almost two-thirds of students in RISE are male (65%) and disproportionately white (58%[7]). Similarly, over half (57%)[8] identify as someone with a disability or chronic illness. Compared to the overall proportion for the board, students in RISE were more likely to have English as their first language (84%) and were more likely to have always lived in Canada (87%).

Recommendations:

12.1 Ensure equitable access to special education: Demographic findings suggest further attention should be paid to ensuring all communities of students have equitable access to special education support and that students involved in programs such as English as a Second Language are still eligible to access critical resources through special education.

12.2 Further examination of the data: Should future Census collection yield further data, we would encourage the GECDSB to disaggregate across program and special education category/exceptionality as disparities may exist beyond the aggregate.

12.3 Capture socioeconomic status in future data collection initiatives: Through the interviews, the belief that RISE may be of greater need/importance to schools experiencing a number of socioeconomic challenges was shared, suggesting that the structure of RISE was important in addressing issues emerging as a result of poverty. Intersectional analysis is critical, particularly when it comes to exploring system responses to disability. As such, in future iterations of the Student Census, we would recommend the GECDSB incorporate items capturing socioeconomic status (e.g. parent education, parent occupation, family structure, access to neighbourhood resources).

12.4 Adopt culturally responsive support and resources: We propose that the GECDSB build on the guiding principles of Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1994) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Geneva Gay's (2000) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and continue to adopt Django Paris's (2012) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy sees racialized students' heritage and community cultural practices as resources to honour and explore. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy adds to that and sees them as resources to honour, explore, and extend. This is an approach that engages with students' youth culture practices and recognizes that youth are producers of

---

[7] Inclusive of figures drawn from the elementary Student Census with > 20% response rate.
[8] Inclusive of figures drawn from the elementary Student Census with > 20% response rate.

culture as well as consumers. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy perpetuates and fosters linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation (Paris & Alim, 2017). As noted earlier, established research shows evidence of the overrepresentation of racialized and marginalized students in special education and academic pathways that offer limited access to postsecondary education (Brown & Parekh, 2010; De Valenzuela et al, 2006; Domina, et al., 2017; Connor, 2017; Archer, et al., 2018) As such, adopting the principles of culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies may support more equitable referrals to special education interventions.

Finding 13. A need to address and challenge deficit understandings of disability.

While not confined to this particular program, special education systems often operate through a fixed perception of ability and disability, grounded in the individual pathology of a child. For example, access to RISE is typically initiated based on perceptions and individual assessments of students' capacity and then requires families to move their children through the Identification, Placement and Review Committee, all of which approach disability through a highly individualized and biomedical model. In some cases, it was reported that association with the RISE program lowered expectations for students' academic success. This perception of limited ability often positions students in a particular trajectory that can be difficult to shift in the future.

Many scholars in disability studies understand disability as the point of intersection between a person's impairment and their environment (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Oliver, 1990). This is echoed by the World Health Organization's conceptualization of disability (2021). The narrative within the RISE context reflects a broader issue in special education, where the focus on medical or diagnostic labels can overshadow a more holistic view of student abilities and contributions, as well as structural causes of learning difficulties. This approach risks reinforcing stigma and limiting expectations for students' academic and social achievements. Structural and social issues that lead to disablement go unchallenged. The experience of disability is deeply influenced by students' social locations, for example, students' experiences related to racial and gender identity, as well as their access to resources and supports both within and outside the school.

Recommendations:

13.1 Embrace sociocultural perspectives on disability and difference: Research shows that there is a close relationship between ableism and racism, which can collude to impact the identification and placement of students in special education and non-Academic programs, often leading to the overrepresentation of minority students (Artiles et al., 2010; Brown & Parekh, 2010; Connor, 2017; Domina et al., 2017; Parekh, 2022). Incorporating diverse perspectives can challenge prevailing deficit-based models of disability, fostering a more nuanced understanding that values different ways of knowing, learning, and being. For instance, Ineese-Nash (2020) suggests that Indigenous communities perceive disability as a strength or gift rather than a deficit.

13.2 Recognize and respond to intersectional experiences: Ableism, racism, and xenophobia within society as well as within the school environment have created disproportionalities throughout the Ontario school system (Parekh, 2022; Tsang & Eizadirad, 2024). For example, looking across exceptionality categories, it becomes apparent that there are disparities with respect to how students are identified in terms of special education labels. Ableism should be addressed as part of whole systems approaches to equity in school systems.

13.3 Adopt differentiated instruction and universal design for learning (UDL) in all classrooms: Inclusive practices, such as DI and UDL, offer frameworks for accommodating diverse learners in general education settings, emphasizing flexibility in the ways information is presented, students express their understanding, and engagement is fostered. Meyer et al. (2014) highlight UDL's role in providing equitable access to learning for all students. Educators should employ UDL principles to design lessons and assessments that accommodate the varied needs and strengths of students, including those in the RISE program.

CONCLUSION

As noted earlier in the report, based on our interviews and focus groups, it is clear that the RISE program is overwhelmingly valued by the community. We also heard that regardless of whether RISE was the only option for support available to families, they recognized benefits from the program such as improved attendance, fewer calls home, and gains in self-confidence. From the perspectives of educators and families, academic achievement was reportedly mixed and cited as dependent on several factors such as the configuration of students, experience of the educator, additional support available within the school and classroom, as well as overall school climate. We are grateful for having had the opportunity to speak to so many passionate educators and families as well as inquisitive and excited students. Hearing stories of learning, accomplishments, new friendships, and caring relationships were powerful. However, we did uncover structural concerns, particularly around the expectations for students in the partially integrated structure, their current and future access to academic opportunities, as well as implications relating to how disability is understood in schools. We believe these concerns, as outlined in the report and how best to address them, warrant further attention and consideration.

GUIDANCE AROUND SYSTEM CHANGE

Depending on how the GECDSB chooses to respond to the findings and recommendations emerging from the review of RISE, there may be interest in moving towards a more inclusive model of education. If so, there are other school districts that have shared their experiences and recommendations.

Overall, successful systems change requires time and investment: Any restructuring of the RISE program should be done with consideration of the impact on current students, families, and educators. The literature indicates that shifting to an inclusion model requires approximately three to five years (Porter, 2010), and requires an investment, not removal, of resources – financial, human, and/or technological. Should the GECDSB consider moving towards a more inclusive model of support, Porter (2010) has outlined the steps required to ensure a successful transition:

WHAT DO WE NEED TO MAKE OUR SCHOOLS INCLUSIVE?

First we need to state clearly that our goal is to have "inclusive, effective, community schools" that are both committed to inclusion and able to effectively carry it out. Once the goal is set and before us, we can make plans to move ahead. It is a challenging goal that will take a significant investment in leadership at all levels – at the policy level; the education system level; and the school and classroom levels.

Let us list a few of the critical steps needed to implement this approach:

1. We need to make a plan for transition and change and accept that this will take at least 3-5 years to do properly.
2. School staff must know how to make their schools and classrooms effective for diverse student populations, and so we need to invest in training for existing teachers and school leaders as well as for new teachers.
3. Understanding that teachers need support to accept and meet this challenge, we need to work with them and their associations to develop supports they need.
4. We need to start by creating positive models of success – classrooms, schools and communities that do a good job and can share their success and strategies with neighbors.
5. We need to identify a cadre of leaders and innovators at all levels and assist them in building networks where they can produce and share knowledge unique to their communities.
6. We need to identify and share "best practices" from research and knowledge that is already available and can be enriched and enhanced by local experience.
7. We need to understand that innovations and changes that will make a difference will require resources. That means money and people. (p. 64)

Consider a co-teaching model with shared leadership: Research and practice have shown that co-teaching models, characterized by shared leadership between general and special education teachers, offer a promising alternative to traditional special education structures (Underwood et al., 2016; Walsh, 2012). By bringing together educators with diverse expertise and perspectives, co-teaching allows for more dynamic and adaptable instruction that meets the needs of all students, including disabled students. This model facilitates a more integrated approach to education, where students receive the necessary support directly within their homeroom classes, thereby reducing the need for segregation and minimizing the social barriers often encountered by students in special programs. Co-teaching encourages a collaborative environment that benefits not only disabled students, but their peers as well, promoting a more inclusive and cohesive classroom community. Implementing co-teaching models can also provide more opportunities for direct instruction tailored to individual students, ensuring that all students have access to the curriculum and school activities without feeling isolated or stigmatized.

Foster collaborative practices across educational settings: Adopting collaborative practices between special and general education teachers and classrooms is essential for creating a more inclusive school environment where all students feel valued and supported. Collaboration can take many forms, including shared planning time for teachers, joint professional development

sessions, and structured peer mentoring programs. By encouraging students in programs like RISE to participate in leadership roles – such as reading buddies, directorial crew for the school plays, or assembly organizers – schools can foster a sense of agency and contribution. Such roles not only provide valuable learning experiences but also help break down barriers between students in specialized programs and their peers in mainstream classes. We heard that students take on roles related to food preparation and serving. These might be considered less desirable or less high-status roles. Collaborative practices extend beyond student interactions, requiring systemic support to facilitate meaningful engagement between educators across different teaching environments. This can include the use of integrated technology platforms for communication, the establishment of joint teaching goals, and the creation of shared resources and materials that support diverse learning needs. By prioritizing collaborative practices, schools can ensure that all students, regardless of their educational setting, have opportunities to excel and contribute to their school community in meaningful ways.

Commit to anti-discrimination and anti-oppressive approaches to education that include strategies to address ableism and disability-related discrimination: We wish to acknowledge the board's recognition of the importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching in its Board Improvement and Equity Plan 2022–2023. We also highlight the Greater Essex County District School Board's stated commitments to "identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers and celebrating diversity and respect for all as outlined in Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy" as important to supporting and enhancing RISE and other special education programs. Particularly important to those goals are the board's commitment to equity and inclusive education in its Multi-Year Accessibility Plan and commitment to continually "work to remove barriers and enhance accessibility for those with disabilities." In addition, such initiatives go hand-in-hand with other goals of the board:

- A commitment to educating students about Indigenous history and experiences and providing resources and supports to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students and their families.
- The development of the 'Dismantling Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2022-2027)' (GECDSB, 2022).
- Offering a range of special education programs and services to provide opportunities for all students to succeed in school.
- Offering new resources to help educators with their own awareness of 2SLGBTQIA+ history, movements, figures, and issues while increasing visibility in their classrooms. (GECDSB, n.d.)

We applaud these initiative and commitments and recommend aligning any response to this review with other equity initiatives coming from the board, as well as strong support for educators, will be in the best interests of students, their families, and the community.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2022). Disability. https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammarguidelines/bias-free-language/disability

Archer, L., Francis, B., Miller, S., Taylor, B., Tereshchenko, A., Mazenod, A., Pepper, D., & Travers, M-C. (2018). The symbolic violence of setting: A Bourdieusian analysis of mixed methods data on secondary students' views about setting. *British Educational Research Journal*, *44*(1), 119–140. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3321

Artiles, A., Kozleski, E., Trent, S., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968–2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children, 76*(3), 279–299.

Associated Press. (2022). *The Associated Press stylebook (56th ed.).* Associated Press.

Ballingall, A. (2015, November 3). Education, age important in post-recession Toronto, report says. *The Toronto Star*. https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2015/11/03/education-ageimportant-in-post-recession-toronto-report-says.html

Barron, K., Collis, R., Gordon, A., Marshall, N., Richmond, A., Parekh, G., & Brown, R. S. (in press). *Examining the impact of self-contained special education classes on students' academic achievement, social belonging and engagement in school: A systematic literature review*. York University.

Brown, R. S., & Parekh, G. (2010). *Special education: Structural overview and student demographics* (Report No. 10/11-03). Toronto District School Board.

Brown, R. S., Parekh, G., & Gallagher-MacKay, K. (2018). *Getting through secondary school: The example of mathematics in recent TDSB grade 9 cohorts* [Presentation]. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, Toronto.

CAST (n.d.). https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl

Cole, S. M., Murphy, H. R., Frisby, M. B., Grossi, T. A., & Bolte, H. R. (2021). The relationship of special education placement and student academic outcomes. *Journal of Special Education*, *54*(4), 217–227. ERIC. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466920925033

Connor, D. J. (2017). Who is responsible for the racialized practices evident within (special) education and what can be done to change them? *Theory Into Practice, 56*(3), 226–233*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2017.1336034

De Valenzuela, J. S., Copeland, S. R., Qi, C. H., & Park, M. (2006). Examining educational equity: Revisiting the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. *Exceptional Children*, *72*(4), 425–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290607200403

DeMatthews, D. E., Serafini, A., & Watson, T. N. (2021). Leading inclusive schools: Principal perceptions, practices, and challenges to meaningful change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *57*(1), 3–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20913897

Domina, T., Penner, A., & Penner, E. (2017). Categorical inequality: Schools as sorting machines.

Flores, O. and Kyere, E. (2020). Advancing equity-based school leadership: the importance of family–school relationships. The Urban Review, 53(1), 127-144. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00557-z

Fonseca, R., & Zheng, Y. (2011). The effect of education on health: Cross-country evidence [Working paper]. Rand Labor and Population.

Gallagher-Mackay, K., Brown, R. S., Parekh, G., James C. E., & Corso, C. (2023). I have all my credits… now what? Disparities in postsecondary transitions, invisible gatekeeping and inequitable access to rigorous upper year curriculum in Toronto, Ontario; York University. https://www.yorku.ca/edu/jean-augustine-chair/wp-content/uploads/sites/708/2023/05/I-have-all-my-credits-now-what_Report.pdf

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.

Gee, K., Gonzalez, M., & Cooper, C. (2020). Outcomes of inclusive versus separate placements: A matched pairs comparison study. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(4), 223–240. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796920943469

Government of Canada. (2017). Imbalances between labour demand and supply (2019-2028). https://occupations.esdc.gc.ca/sppc-cops/content.jsp?cid=52&lang=en

Graham, E., Lawson, C., Rasheed, S. A., & Voltz, D. (2007). A comparison of inclusive versus resource classroom placement for Black students with mild disabilities at the secondary level. Is there a need for separation? *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*, 64–74. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1140316

Greater Essex County District School Board. (n.d.). *Board improvement and equity plan (2022-2023)*. Accessed Feb 12, 2024, https://www.publicboard.ca/en/about-gecdsb/Plans-and-Reports/Board-Improvement-and-Equity-Plan-2022-2023.pdf

Greater Essex County District School Board (2022). Dismantling Anti-Black Racism Strategy (2022-2027). https://www.publicboard.ca/en/family-and-community-support/resources/Documents/Dismantling-Anti-Black-Racism-Strategy/GECDSB_Anti-Racism_Strategy-FINAL.pdf

Gregory, M., & Nichols, E. (2018). From the outside in: Using a whole-school paradigm to improve the educational success of students with trauma histories and/or neurodevelopmental disabilities. Trauma, Autism, and Neurodevelopmental Disorders: Integrating Research, Practice, and Policy, 241-268.

Guralnick, M. J. (2011). Why early intervention works: A systems perspective. *Infants and Young Children, 24*(1), 6–28. Doi: 10.1097/IYC.0b013e3182002cfe

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement.* Routledge. Hehir, T., Grindal, T., Freeman, B., Lamoreau, R., Borquaye, Y., & Burke, S. (2016). *A summary of the evidence on inclusive education*. Instituto Alana & Abt Assoc.

Ineese-Nash, N. (2020). Disability as a colonial construct: The missing discourse of culture in conceptualizations of disabled Indigenous children. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, *9*(3), 28–51. https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i3.645

Irwin, N. (2015, April 15). Paltry pay: Why American workers without much education are being hammered. *The New York Times*, A3.

Kearney, M., Hershbein, B., & Jacome, E. (2015). *Profiles of change: Employment, earnings and occupations from 1990–2013*. Brookings Institute.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). What we can learn from multicultural education research. *Educational leadership*, *51*(8), 22–26.

Li, S. (2023). The effect of teacher self-efficacy, teacher resilience, and emotion regulation on teacher burnout: A mediation model. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*, 1185079. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1185079

Loiselle, A. (2024, February 26). ETFO concerned about review of spec ed program at GECDS. *CKNX NewToday.ca*. https://cknxnewstoday.ca/windsor/news/2024/02/26/etfo-concerned-about-review-of-spec-ed-program-at-gecdsb

Losen, D. J., & Orfield, G. (Eds.). (2002). *Racial inequity in special education*. Harvard Education Press.

Meekosha, H., & Shuttleworth, R. (2009). What's so "critical" about critical disability studies? *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, *15*(1), 47–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2009.11910861

Meyer, A., Rose, D. H., & Gordon, D. (2014). *Universal design for learning: Theory and practice*. CAST Professional Publishing.

Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2016). 8. Duty to accommodate. *Policy on ableism and discrimination based on disability.* https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/8-duty-accommodate

Mitchell, D. (2010). *Education that fits: Review of international trends in the education of students with special needs*. University of Canterbury. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/86011/Mitchell-Review-Final.pdf

Mitchell, D. R. (2014). *What really works in special and inclusive education: Using evidence-based teaching strategies* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Mitchell, D. (2015). *Education that fits: Review of international trends in the education of students with special needs* (2nd ed.). University of Canterbury. https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/psdlitreview_Education thatfits.pdf

National Center on Disability and Journalism. (2021). *Disability language style guide*. https://ncdj.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NCDJ-STYLE-GUIDE-EDIT-2021-SILVERMAN.pdf

Oliver, M. (1990). *The politics of disablement*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2022). *2022-23 education funding: A guide to the special education grant*. https://files.ontario.ca/edu-2223-speced-guide-en-2022-03-21.pdf

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2023). *Identifying students with special education needs*. https://www.ontario.ca/page/identifying-students-special-education-needs

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2024). *School board progress reports: Five-year graduation rate*. https://www.app.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/bpr/allBoards.asp?chosenIndicator=11

Parekh, G. (2013). *Structured pathways: An exploration of programs of study, school-wide and in-school programs, as well as promotion and transference across secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board*. Toronto District School Board.

Parekh, G. (2022). *Ableism in education: Rethinking school practices and policies*. Routledge.

Parekh, G., & Brown, R. (2019). Changing lanes: The relationship between special education placement and students' academic futures. *Politics of Education Yearbook, 33*(1), 111–135. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818812772

Parekh, G., Brown, R. S., & James, C. E. (2020). *Who comes to York? Access, participation and graduation trends.* Technical Report. York University. Toronto: Ontario.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational researcher*, *41*(3), 93–97.

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.

Porter, G. (2010). Making Canadian schools inclusive: A call to action. *Education Canada*, *48*(2), 62-66. https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2008-v48-n2-Porter.pdf

Quan, D., & James, C. E. (2017). *Unlocking student potential through data: Final report*. Ontario Ministry of Education.

Reynolds, A. D., Crea, T. M., Medina, J. A. S., Degnan, E., & McRoy, R. G. (2014). A mixed-methods case study of parent involvement in an urban high school serving minority students. Urban Education, 50(6), 750-775. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914534272

Schellenberg, G. (2004). Immigrants in Canada's census metropolitan areas. Statistics Canada Business and Labour Market Analysis Division. Retrieved September 2, 2006 from http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-613-MIE/89-613-MIE2004003.htm

Shuls, J. V., & Flores, J. M. (2020). Improving teacher retention through support and development. Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 4(1), n1.

Signor-Buhl, S. J., LeBlanc, M., & McDougal, J. (2006). Conducting district-wide evaluations of special education services: A case example. *Psychology in the Schools*, *43*(1), 109–115. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20134

Stapleton-Corcoran, E. (2022). Universal design for learning (UDL). Center for the Advancement of Teaching Excellence at the University of Illinois Chicago. https://teaching.uic.edu/cate-teaching-guides/inclusive-equity-minded-teaching-practices/universal-design-for-learning-udl/

Statistics Canada. (2024). Regional unemployment rates used by the Employment Insurance program, three-month moving average, seasonally adjusted, Table: 14-10-0354-01. https://ww150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035401

Tomlinson, C. (2017). *How to differentiate instruction in academically diverse classrooms* (3rd ed.). ASCD.

Tsang, J., & Eizadirad. A. (2024). We are all racists: Calling out and undoing whiteness in teacher education. In Kempf. A., & Watts, H. (Eds.). *Critical Perspectives on White Supremacy and Racism in Canadian Education: Dispatches from the Field* (pp. 81-98)*.* Routledge.

Underwood, K. (2009). *The construction of disability in our schools: Teachers and parents' perspectives on the experiences of labelled students*. Sense Publishers.

Underwood, K., Church, K., & van Rhijn, T. (2020). Responsible for normal: The contradictory work of families. In S. Winton & G. Parekh (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on education policy in schools, families, and communities* (pp. 89–106).Information Age Publishing.

Underwood, K., Di Santo, A., Valeo, A., & Langford, R. (2016). Partnerships in full day kindergarten classrooms: Early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers working together. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, *41*(1), 36–45.

Walsh, J. M. (2012). Co-teaching as a school system wide strategy for continuous improvement. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *56*(1), 29–36.

Workforce Windsor-Essex. (2024, January). *Labour force report, Windsor census metropolitan area*. https://www.workforcewindsoressex.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/January-2024-Windsor_LFS_Report.pdf

World Health Organization. (2021). Disability and health: Key facts. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health