York Region District School Board

Feedback Report on the Proposed K-12 Education Standards

To the K-12 Education Standards Development Committee

Submitted by the Human Rights Commissioner's Office on behalf of York Region District School Board in response to the proposed Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) Education standards and initial recommendations.

Alternate formats for accessing the feedback report

The YRDSB Feedback Report on the K-12 Education Standards is available in any of the following ways:

- **Online to the public:** Go to [Accessibility Reports and Plans](#) on the YRDSB accessibility webpage;

- **By email:** aoda@yrdsb.ca;

- **By telephone:** Leave a voicemail at 905-884-2046 ext. 311, and the Accessibility Officer will follow-up with you; or

- **In an alternate format upon request**.

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Background and Context

The accessibility portfolio for York Region District School Board (YRDSB or the Board) is a mandate of the Human Rights Commissioner's Office (HRCO), which provides leadership over the Board's AODA Advisory Committee. Accessibility at YRDSB is guided through the shared responsibilities and collaborative commitments of the AODA Advisory Committee. The HRCO has worked with AODA Advisory Committee members to review the [Proposed Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) Education Standards - 2021 Initial Recommendations Report](), and to request additional feedback from members of the Board community at large.

Synthesizing the Report for Internal Use

The proposed K-12 Education standards and recommendations were initially reviewed and synthesized by the Accessibility Officer into [Shared Google Docs]() based on the seven barrier areas. The K-12 Education Standards Development Committee (SDC) [executive summary report]() was also integrated into the shared Google Docs. The synthesized Google Docs were created to chunk the contents of the initial recommendations in order to provide an easier way for AODA Advisory Committee members and other Board staff members to review and comment directly on specific recommendations related to their respective areas of work.

Meetings were held with various subcommittees and working groups under the AODA Advisory Committee in order to collaboratively review specific barriers recommendations. For example, the Accessibility Officer met with the Barrier Buster and Built Environment Subcommittee on several occasions to review the barrier seven recommendations on physical and architectural barriers.
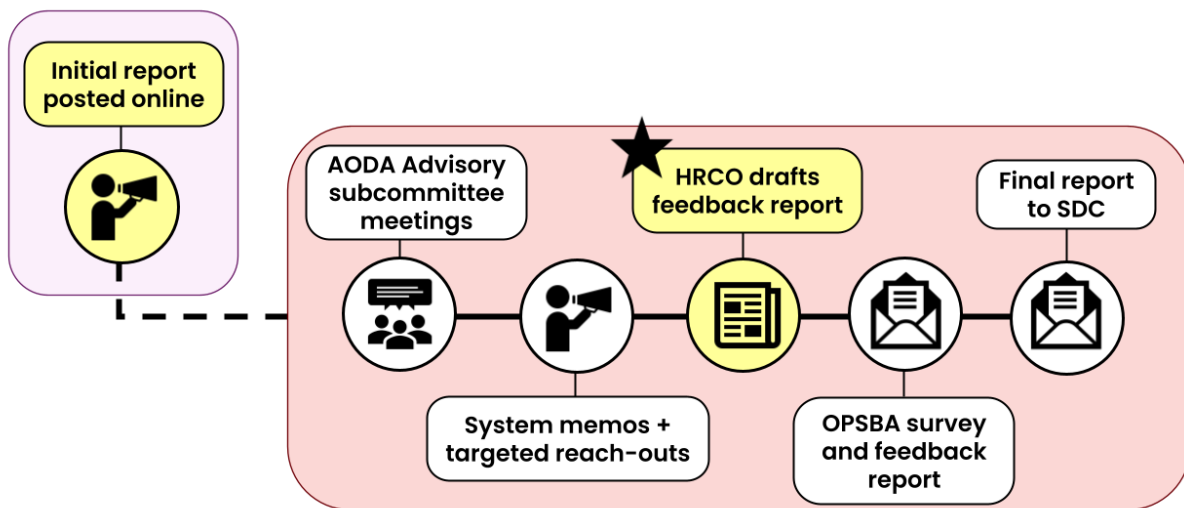
Communication to the System

Following a meeting with members of YRDSB's senior leadership team, a series of system memos were shared internally via the Board's "News Digest" email. The memos included four different options for reviewing the recommendations:

1. [Summary of the recommendations]() posted on the YRDSB accessibility web page under Accessibility Reports and Plans;

2. [Full initial recommendations report](#) available online to the public;
3. [Executive summary report](#) from the K-12 Education Standards Development Committee; or
4. [Video summary](#) by David Lepofsky, Chair of the AODA Alliance.

The proposed the K-12 Education standards were also shared through social media postings on the Board's Instagram and Twitter pages. All staff and community members who reviewed the recommendations were asked to complete the [YRDSB Review and Feedback Form](#) by Friday, September 17, 2021. The completed Google Forms (19 in total), in addition to the AODA Advisory subcommittee and working group meetings, were used to draft this feedback report. The majority of the feedback forms were completed by YRDSB teachers, with the remaining forms completed by a combination of administrators, school-based support staff, non-school based staff, consultants and parent/guardians or community members.

As led by the HRCO, the Board's internal review and feedback process for the proposed K-12 Education standards is depicted in the graphic below.

All feedback received on the proposed K-12 Education standards was reviewed by the Accessibility Officer and grouped into themes. General feedback themes are presented first, followed by the main themes that emerged for each barrier area, which comprise the remaining sections of this feedback report.

General Feedback

Ease of Reading and Understanding

The majority of survey respondents, as educated school board employees, agreed that "overall, the report was easy to read and understand." From a more critical accessibility lens however, we need to recognize that some YRDSB community members can better understand more plain language writing, particularly for English language learners or individuals with learning disabilities.

A primary example of the need for simplified language is the report's [12 guiding principals](). Despite drawing out the key idea in each guiding principle, there was notable overlap between the guiding principles in terms of some phrases and "key words" (e.g., dignity, equality, equity, inclusion, human rights, etc.). As a result, the 12 guiding principles were synthesized before being shared internally. The following table compares the original wording with the condensed versions of each guiding principle.

Original Wording	Condensed Version
1. Students with disabilities have the right to dignity, respect, equality, choice, voice and full participation in a barrier-free public education system K-12, regardless of race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation or any other factor(s).	1. Students with disabilities have the **right to dignity, respect, and full participation** in a public education system free of barriers and Code-based discrimination.
2. Students, parents/caregivers, educators, administrators, trustees and community members are valued and partners in creating and maintaining inclusive and equitable school communities, working together to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices, systemic barriers and biases from school systems to allow full	2. **Everyone is valued** in creating and maintaining inclusive and equitable school communities, including full access to a high-quality education for students with disabilities.

Original Wording	Condensed Version
access to a high-quality education and full participation for students with disabilities.	
3. Schools are places where diverse voices, talents and skills are recognized, where equity, equality, inclusion and human rights are well understood and applied, positively impacting educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Classroom, school and system practices are reflective of and responsive to the diversity of students with disabilities.	3. **Diverse voices, talents and skills are recognized and celebrated** in classrooms, schools and systems that reflect and respond to the diversity of students with disabilities.
4. Changing attitudes, beliefs and practices are facilitated through accessible education and training related to equity, equality, inclusion and human rights. Principles of equity, equality and inclusive education should be embedded throughout all training, programs, practices and policies.	4. **Changing attitudes, beliefs and practices** are facilitated through accessible education and training related to equity, equality, inclusion and human rights, which are embedded throughout all training, programs, services and communities.
5. Inter-ministerial collaboration, planning and accountability is essential to providing supports and services to students with very high or complex needs who are marginalized or fully excluded from meaningful participation in their schools and communities.	5. **Inter-ministerial collaboration, planning and accountability** is essential to providing supports and services to students with very high or complex needs who are excluded from meaningful access in their schools and communities.
6. Cultures of high expectations are created for all learners through an accessible and culturally responsive curriculum, appropriate instructional supports, and meaningful and relevant learning experiences. Systems and practices for assessment of quality learning are in place that better respond to students' diversity and needs related to disability.	6. **Cultures of high expectations are created for all learners** through an accessible and culturally responsive curriculum, appropriate instructional supports, meaningful learning experiences, and systems for assessment of quality learning.

Original Wording	Condensed Version
7. Universal design for learning should be to support the development of universally accessible curriculum instruction, and assessment methods, learning activities in classrooms, experiential experiences, online learning environments, physical spaces and multiple pathways to achieving growth and success as a learner.	7. **Universal Design for Learning** should be used to inform the development of accessible curriculum, instruction and assessment methods, as well as to support classroom learning, experiential learning and online learning environments.
8. There is intentional collection, analysis and use of relevant data to fully understand learners' strengths and needs, to identify and remove barriers, to support effective interventions, and to design accessible quality education for all.	8. **The intentional collection and analysis of relevant data** is used to fully understand learners' strengths and needs, to identify and remove barriers, to support effective interventions, and to design accessible quality education for all.
9. Families have access to information in readily accessible, multiple formats in different places, including ministry and school board websites, and flexible opportunities and mechanisms for full participation in decision-making processes.	9. **Families have access to information** in readily accessible, multiple format and flexible opportunities for full participation in decision-making processes.
10. Effective transition planning in schools is informed through collaborative relationships with families living with disabilities and cross-sector collaboration with community partners for integrated transition planning.	10. **Effective transition planning** in schools is informed through collaborative relationships with families living with disabilities and cross-sector collaboration with community partners for integrated transition planning.
11. Research-informed, evidence-based programs, pedagogies and policies facilitate a culture of respect for equity, equality, access and inclusion in all schools, and ensure evidence of impact across the education system for students with disabilities. Research-informed, evidence-based professional learning designs on accessible education within a human rights	11. **Research-informed, evidence-based** programs, pedagogies, policies and professional learning facilitate a culture of respect for equity, equality and access within a human rights framework created by transdisciplinary teams that include persons with disabilities.

Original Wording	Condensed Version
framework are created and delivered within and school boards by transdisciplinary teams of professionals including persons with disabilities.	
12. Laws, policies and programs in the education system should fully and effectively serve students with all disabilities within the meaning of the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and/or the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 and that the needs of students with low-incidence disability not be marginalized, sidelined or de-prioritized.	12. **Public education laws, policies and programs** should fully and effectively serve the diversity of students with and who experience disabilities within the meaning of Ontario's Human Rights Code, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and/or the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

As we continue to adopt more inclusive language in education, it has become clear that words matter. There should be a conscious consideration for the words, language and sentence structure of the final report, as well as throughout the process of passing the proposed K-12 Education standards into law under the AODA. Traditional legislative language is a barrier to accessibility. Plain language alternative formats should accompany any current and new accessibility standards.

Consistency of Recommendations

The methodology section outlined how all initial recommendations were discussed and reviewed by the full committee through a collaborative and engaged process. However, it was clear that the different barrier areas of the recommendations report were drafted by different individuals/small groups from the SDC. In addition to different writing styles, the recommendations were not formatted consistently across the different sections or barriers areas of the report.

Some recommendations included up to 20 sub-recommendations presented as numbered lists (e.g., 49.1 - 49.20 parent and student participation recommendations), lettered lists (e.g., 92a - 92m elevator recommendations), or separate recommendations (e.g., recommendations 43 - 48 all relate to IEPs, but are short and

separate recommendations instead of sub-recommendations). The recommendations and respective sub-recommendations should be formatted and presented with consistency in the final report.

Barrier One and Barrier Two Feedback: Attitudes, Awareness and Training

All YRDSB survey respondents agreed with the barrier one recommendations, with one respondent adding the following comment:

> "It is my experience that Special Education & ELL supports are the first to be reduced when schools attempt to balance their budgets at the grassroots level. This sends a message."

Overlapping Barrier Areas

It is not clear why the barrier one and two recommendations were presented as separate barriers areas in the initial recommendations report. Two of the five barrier one recommendations relate to accessibility training (or "in-servicing"), which is also the focus of the three awareness and training recommendations. Awareness and training are often the first steps to addressing and changing attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions about people with disabilities.

Undervalued Impact of Ableism and Attitudes

Attitudinal barriers are the most pervasive barriers to accessibility, with ableism still very prevalent throughout education. The initial recommendations reports does address ableism in the guiding principles statement and recognizes that "attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions underpin the work of all other small groups". However, only five of the 184 total recommendations are focused on addressing attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions. The undervalued impact of ableism and attitudes in this report is particularly clear when compared to the 50 physical and architectural barriers recommendations (with hundreds of sub-recommendations).

Out of the five barriers one recommendations, the training recommendations should be expanded to include, where possible, experiential learning and working with students with disabilities. Case in point recommendation 3 on training for teacher candidates:

> "Pre-service teacher education needs to have much more theoretical and practical experience working with students with disabilities. [Co-op] teaching opportunities should expand to special education placements, including self-contained programs. Secondary teaching qualifications needs to expand to include those with experience working with students with complex and special education needs."

A major attitudinal and systemic barrier in education continues to be the socially acceptable discomfort level when it comes to teaching or engaging with students from community classrooms. Teaching in a community classroom should not be accepted as a "stepping stone" or "checkbox" to teaching in mainstream or advancement with the Board. Teachers and support staff should not be considered "brave" or "patient" for wanting to work in community classrooms; in fact, it is quite frankly ableist for any teacher who does not want to teacher in a community classroom. This systemic ableism needs to be more purposefully challenged in the barrier one recommendations.

A much larger focus on the attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions recommendations is the need to establish a proper foundation for affecting a meaningful and lasting cultural shift in education towards accessibility and acceptance of differences as part of life.

Limitations of Universal Design for Learning

Recognizing the value of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a few survey respondents were quick to note some of its limitations. UDL is a good and essential starting point for building a culture of accessibility, but we must also ensure the diversity of disabilities are recognized and supported.

> "It is critical that UDL encompass the invisible disabilities in addition to the visible (often physical)." These are often harder to measure, and more difficult for people to understand because they are unable to "see" the result of the UDL

measure or accommodation. Often one can appear to be doing fine but the underlying effort and stress of managing in an environment goes undetected in a classroom setting.

"... sometimes the concept of UDL can be used to exclude those on the far margin or disability. Those with severe disabilities are often not served. Also, recognize that it is nearly impossible to know what the needs are until you have lived with or cared for someone with a disability. Assumption of need(s) is a danger here. We must gather input from multiple stakeholders to ensure the full picture is being gathered and even the rarer needs are being considered. Don't act on the "stereotype" version of disability."

Recommendation 6 to standardize UDL training should be elaborated to include more specific recommendations on the extent to which the concept of UDL should be covered in the UDL training. For example, is the recommendation to address the UDL contents from the Ministry's 2013 Learning for All resource guide (Learning for All - A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12)? Or is it to go more in depth into the concept of UDL? What are the recommended resources and research to support this recommendation?

Barrier Three Feedback: Curriculum, Assessment and Instruction

Anti-Oppressive Curriculum Reforms

The curriculum, assessment and instruction recommendations essentially calls for substantial reforms to Ontario curriculum in recommendation 9. These significant reviews and renewals of curriculum should seek community participation, as expressed by a member of the AODA Advisory Committee's Curriculum Working Group:

"This review must include community, particularly communities who have been marginalized so that they are centred in the review; continue to work

with community when making changes, and when monitoring for impact. This would be an anti-racist, anti-oppressive approach."

One survey respondent shared their thoughts on how to reform curriculum and assessment practices:

Curriculum needs an overhaul to make these changes work in a meaningful way. Curriculum must come away from grade-specific, and be outlined as a continuum. Curriculum should be more skill-based than content-based (i.e., science - skills of inquiry, hypothesis, testing/experiment; in history - skills/ concepts of chronology, critical analysis, perspective-taking) as opposed to specific units to be done in each grade.

Assessment needs an overhaul as well. Remove grades/leveling for up to grade 6; reporting should be clear and easy for students and families to understand; what has the student learned? What can they do? What can they work on next?

Physical Health and Wellness, Mental Health and Well-Being

The Board's mental health leads were consulted directly on recommendation 25, and shared feedback and questions regarding three main themes: terminology, related research and resources, and evaluation concerns.

Clarify Terminology

"Wellness" and "well-being" are terms that are often used interchangeably. Are these recommendations associating physical health specifically with wellness? And mental health specifically with well-being? If so, recommendation 25 that "the ministry develop a Health and Well-being strategy and action plan..." suggests it is a mental health action plan, yet the recommendation mentions physical health as well as sexual health? Sub-recommendation 25.1 also references "inclusive design" without context:

"Elsewhere in the document, Universal Design is referenced, [but] here, inclusive design is referenced. Both hold value and promise. However, I do not believe Inclusive design has been defined here."

Clarification with respect to the terminology used throughout recommendation 25 is needed.

Align Research and Resources

What role, if any, does the [Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum](#) play in this proposed Health and Well-being strategy and action plan? Additionally, it was noted that the concept of social-emotional learning (SEL) is currently under review by School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) alongside the Equity Secretariat with a view towards equity and an anti-oppressive practice approach." The K-12 Education standards need to be aligned with existing and new research and resources as they relate to mental health and well-being.

Evaluating / Measuring Recommendation 25

Concerns were raised about how the Ministry will evaluate and measure the implementation of recommendation 25 and its many sub-recommendations that include (but are not limited to):

- coordinated resources,
- guidelines,
- materials,
- programming,
- beyond the school environment,
- sexual health education,
- incorporating training for educators, and
- awareness and lived experience of disabilities are part of the overall learning opportunities.

"How are guidelines different from materials versus resources in this context?" It was also noted that educators cannot be equipped to measure or "assess the resiliency needs of all students" (recommendation 25.6);

> "Teachers are not able to 'assess' resiliency. Resilience is a factor both informed by the individual and system elements"

A recommendation such as this cannot be appropriately implemented and supported with so many moving parts in one recommendation. Concerns with proper implementation and evaluation also applies to the other lengthy

recommendations in this report (i.e., that include 6 to 20 sub-recommendations). The proposed timelines also need to better reflect and respond to competing priorities and the amount of dedicated time and system learning necessary.

Indigenous Education

In consulting a number of the Board's Indigenous consultants and lead staff, it was questioned whether recommendation 26 was made in consultation with Indigenous communities. It was specifically noted that:

> "[sub-recommendation 26.1] is infringing on the two row wampum teachings (treaty agreements) and Indigenous sovereignty... which will create issues at the board level for learning on the land. One does not supersede the other."

The sub-recommendation should be revised to express that the ministry will work in collaboration with Indigenous communities/partners to support "curriculum design and content including Indigenous curriculum is accessible and available for students with disabilities." The following sub-recommendation 26.2 raised implementation concerns regarding Indigenous pedagogy, ways of knowing and experiences.

> "Is this an expectation for classroom teachers? How will teachers be provided with cultural competency training needed to understand what Indigenous pedagogies are? How will cultural appropriation be avoided?"

Barrier Four Feedback: Digital Learning and Technology

Accessible Procurement Limitations

YRDSB adopted a statement of accessible procurement that is now included in all Purchasing Services contracts and Requests for Proposals. However, ensuring "that all technology purchased by a school board ensures full digital accessibility" (recommendation 35.1) is not always possible. Many of the major digital tools/resources procured by YRDSB (and most school boards) are US-based vendors, such as Google and Microsoft. Increasingly more and improved

accessibility features have become available in Google Workspace for Education (formerly Google Apps or GAPPS) and Microsoft Office 365 over the past 18 months. However, software updates are beyond the control of school boards, and can often present new learning curves for staff to refamiliarize themselves with new interfaces.

Long-Term Funding Commitments

Consistent with recommendation 36 regarding long-term funding for assistive technologies and related hardware, one survey respondent believed that:

> "All school boards should ensure full, open access to web applications for education (e.g., Google Apps for Education, TextHelp Read & Write) to provide universal access to assistive technology (e.g. text-to-speech, speech-to-text, screen reading, masking and organization) for all students, staff and employees. This will reduce barriers for students or employees with non-identified barriers. Setting minimum standards for access would ensure equal access to all stakeholders in Ontario.

Virtual Meeting Platform Flexibility

Recommendations 39.1 reads that "only accessible virtual platforms shall be used by a school board…" This fails to recognize other factors that are considered in procuring and supporting certain web conferencing platforms, including: privacy and confidentiality, the need to restrict access at times, internal capacity and know-how, as well as cost. The recommendation should have allowances for web conferencing platforms that are not "fully accessible" if the virtual environment is still accessible. For example, GoToWebinar is one of the only web conferencing platforms with a built-in feature that requires all attendees to pre-register (i.e., pre-event registration). However, GoToWebinar does not have an integrated automatic captions or transcripts feature, but can be made available through different ways (e.g., CART or Google Live Captions).

An integrated comparison matrix was created by the Board's Information and Technology Services (ITS) team to compare accessibility features across the different conferencing platforms. Refer to the chart on the next page, which is intended to help Board staff choose the appropriate video conferencing platform.

	Zoom	Google Meet	Microsoft Teams	GoTo Meeting	GoTo Webinar	Google Meet Live Stream	YouTube LiveStream (Via Zoom)	Microsoft Teams Live Events
Participant Limit	300	250	250	150	3000	100,000	Unlimited	10,000+
Access Required	GAPPS + Zoom	GAPPS	YRDSB	YRDSB / Anyone	YRDSB / Anyone	GAPPS	GAPPS / Anyone	GAPPS, YRDSB, Guests
Breakout Rooms	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Captioning	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Transcription	Yes	Yes*	Yes	Yes*	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes
Translation	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Screen Reader Support	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Keyboard Navigation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Host Controls (spotlight, mute)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Listen-only Mode	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pre-Event Registration	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes*
Recording	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Dial-in Numbers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

The comparison chart above lists the various video conferencing platforms supported by YRDSB, including: Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting; and for larger listen-only mode events: GoToWebinar, Google Meet Live Stream, YouTube Live Stream (via Zoom) and Microsoft Teams Live Events. This YRDSB resource compares the different accessibility and other features (i.e., participant limit and type of access required) of each video conferencing platform, and whether they offer: breakout rooms, captioning, transcriptions, translations, screen reader

support, keyboard navigation, host controls, listen-only mode, pre-event registration, recording and/or local dial-in numbers.

Recommendation 39 should instead support accessible online or virtual learning environments as a whole, rather than narrowly recommending that "only the most accessible virtual meeting platforms should be used..." The individual hosting the virtual meeting needs to know how to foster an accessible virtual learning and/or working environment for all participants.

Digital Accessibility Capacity Building

Consistent with the previous feedback theme, the barrier four recommendations on digital learning and technology should, in general, consider strategies that build staff capacity to better support and implement the proposed the Digital and Technology Action Plan. Learning and training sessions need to be made available and mandatory for all staff to develop the core competencies needed to host an accessible online learning or working environment.

Barrier Five Feedback: Organizational Barriers

Format of Recommendations

As mentioned in the "consistency of recommendations" general feedback, recommendations 43 to 48 all relate to IEPs and are presented as separate recommendations. This format is easier to follow compared to the recommendations with up to 20 sub-recommendations. Using recommendations 43 to 48 as the example, all recommendations should be concise where possible, and split into separate recommendations if more than five sub-recommendations are included.

IEP-specific Feedback

A number of Student Services staff reviewed the barrier five recommendations and provided feedback related to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process:

Simplify IEPs

"IEPs should be simplified/shortened. Ensure they are true working documents, focused on a few key learning objectives at a time and updated regularly.

Standardize IEPs

One survey respondent provided feedback that expands on recommendations 44 to revise the format and content of IEPs:

"The IEP format should be designed centrally within the Ministry of Ed. to present the same information in a way that is easily shared between school boards. This should be reviewed regularly, to ensure they can capture all necessary and relevant details.

Consider providing access to all IEPs through a coordinated platform that allows for common access to staff between boards as well as parents from home. Using a common platform would allow programming goals, transition plans and SEA equipment to be tracked, monitored and shared between boards more easily.

The OCT should establish standards that allow for alternative training to serve as teaching qualifications (working with students with complex needs), rather than traditional subject areas to ensure that the most qualified teachers are teaching the high-needs populations."

Another survey respondent suggested a standardized model for IEPs:

"Even though IEP is very personalized, due to its complication, it is still preferred to have a universal model with SMART goal examples. It can be designed on school board level, Ministry of Education level, or a federal based body level. Parents need shared information in a central place to access IEP knowledge. Besides being classified as different disorders, the model can also find the common ground. For example, many students have behavioral, executive functioning, social and self-advocacy concerns. The model can break down each executive functional skills and give guidance."

IEP Accountability

"All staff teaching/supporting a student with an IEP must sign the IEP, acknowledging that they are legally obliged to implement it. This legal obligation needs to be enforced; it is currently not and more often than not, IEPs are written that do not reflect what is actually happening in the classroom. Families must be able to rely on the IEP; they need to feel confident that it is being implemented."

IEP Access for All

One Board community member shared their child's IEP journey, highlighting the importance of recommendation 46 to make IEPs more accessible to all students:

"I would like to share my child's IEP journey. One of my children was referred to a specialist by the school when he was in JK. Even though nothing was diagnosed, he got an IEP for behavioural/social concerns. In grade 1, the school recommended that we withdrew from the IEP since his hitting issues were gone. In grade 4, another school referred my son to a specialist, and ADHD was diagnosed. With my constant request, my child got his IEP in grade 7. In between, I learned bunch of educational courses regarding special needs. And then I found out that my child may be twice exceptional. I shared my thoughts that my child may be twice exceptional two years ago. However, my child's case was considered lower priority for school psychological assessment. I had to arrange a private assessment and confirmed 4 exceptionalities when my child is 12. We are heading another journey to update the IEP. My child is lucky and unlucky at the same time. His exceptional identification was missed by parents, educational professionals, or health specialists for many years.

I recommend that the school board provide universal guidance for interventions/strategies for all the students, even if they don't have a chance to get a formal diagnosis, or missed their identifications. Not every student will go through the formal IPRC/IEP process. For most students, it is very obvious to be seen who may need further interventions with SMART goals. Don't wait for a formal diagnosis. Make those strategies available for every student. Share the

best practices and resources in a central place for teachers, school staff, students and parents."

Social Isolation

Recommendation 67 that proposes staff assistance for social interaction and play should be moved to the IEP-related recommendations given that its implementation would carried out through a student's IEP. One survey respondent was echoed the importance of creating school support teams to promote social inclusion:

"For social isolation, I recommend a school support team actively monitoring social interactions. A student's social life will change his view in his classwork, school and life. It is one of the most important aspects at school. Recess time is a great time to detect social concerns as well."

Inter-Ministry Collaboration

One survey respondent shared feedback and questions specifically in response to recommendation 41:

"Effective intersectoral collaboration is a huge barrier (Ministry of Health, Social Services). How will the Ontario Health Teams be leveraged to support his recommendation? We are seeing now Ontario Health Teams collaborate across siloed care in health and leaning into the need to effectively collaborate with social service agencies at the local level. How might the ministry of education and boards be involved in this work?"

Barrier Six Feedback: Social Realms

Accessible Field Trips and Transportation

Similar to the feedback regarding virtual meeting platform flexibility, there should be flexibility with the educational and online events recommendation 57. The recommendation should ensure an accessible overall experience for students and staff with disabilities during field trips, rather than to "only hold educational events at venues whose built environment is accessible to students and staff with disabilities".

A narrow recommendation to only hold educational events at accessible venues shifts the responsibility for accessibility almost entirely on the venue. The teacher(s), staff or school board department organizing the event would only have to ask if the venue is accessible or not. However, accessibility is a shared responsibility. The person or group organizing the educational event should know to ask about different accessibility features[1] at the venue, including:

- Ramps, lifts or elevators whenever there are stairs,
- Automatic doors and wide doorways into buildings and common areas,
- Accessible public washrooms,
- Accessible seating areas (in auditoriums, arenas or picnic areas),
- Accessible pools and change rooms; and
- Whether support persons or staff are required to pay entrance fees.

The event organizer(s) should have a basic understanding of how to make the event experience accessible for all, which includes proactively supporting accommodations including transportation considerations. One survey participant shared their thoughts on how legislating accessible transportation on field trips without any understanding may in fact perpetuate ableism:

> "While I agree with the need to facilitate inclusiveness in the social realm like field trips, the fact is that [accessible] busing and transportation will likely mean students needing that transportation travel separately... Also, specialized services cost more. Will there be a plan to subsidize specialized transport? Otherwise, I foresee an issue with ableist and reactionary thinking if this leads to fewer or cancelled or more expensive trips and events... "because we need a wheelchair bus" or whatever the issue. Careful attention needs to be paid to ensure we do not inadvertently worsen relationships and perpetuate negative thinking towards those with disabilities."

Recommendation 57 should be expanded to include some of the elements of recommendation 65, including establishing a process to affirmatively reach out to potential venues (adapted from 65.2), ensuring the venue is informed of their duty to accommodate (adapted from 65.3), sharing supports and advice for venues who

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[1] Refer to AODA.ca [Accessible School Field Trips](#) article (October 25, 2019).

need assistance (adapted from 65.4), and surveying students with disabilities at the end of any educational event or field trip (adapted from 65.6).

Transitions Facilitator/Navigator

One survey respondent supported the proposed transition facilitator/navigator in recommendation 58:

> "For the transitional plan, I recommend making the transitional support available and automatically for every student, especially for students with autism. A model with different levels of support can be designed. Current teachers may assess the transitional support needs and record the suggestions for the next teacher/school. The communication channel needs to be opened to parents and students before the end of the school/transition time to determine who needs transitional support for the next transition."

Bullying/Cyberbullying Workshops

One survey respondent supported recommendation 64, while urging earlier interventions for anti-bullying workshops and learning:

> "Early work on respect, bullying and consent are needed to proactively mitigate exclusion and combat self-esteem and mental wellness deterioration at the elementary level, where identities and feelings of self-worth are largely shaped. It is my experience that peer responses to individuals with disabilities have the greatest impact on their development and performance."

Access to Co-op Education and Employment Opportunities

Related to recommendation 65 on experiential/co-op learning opportunities, one survey participant suggested school boards explore internal placement opportunities within schools as well as in Board administrative positions:

> "School boards should work with unions to expand and standardize access to in-school placement opportunities (with custodians, office staff and food service providers). School boards should be compelled to use their

administrative sites to support co-op placements; it's an opportunity to demonstrate the success of co-op partnerships with neurodiverse students.

Opportunities should be available at all post-secondary institutions for students who don't graduate with an OSSD. Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE) and vocational-type programs should be available at *all* institutions to provide social, employment and academic opportunities. Post-secondary institutions are like small, self-contained towns. Within each, are opportunities to work in almost every employment sector, as well as opportunities to socialize and build community. Students who graduate with fewer than 30-credits should be eligible to access a CICE or vocational-type program at any institution."

Barrier Seven Feedback: Physical and Architectural

The Built Environment and Barrier Buster subcommittee under the AODA Advisory Committee, in addition to members of the Board's Plant Services, were directly consulted on the proposed recommendations specific to the physical and architectural barriers. Additional feedback was provided through the internal review and feedback form.

Ministry Funding

The vast majority of the recommendations intended to remove physical and architectural barriers in school boards is dependent on substantially increased capital funding from the Ministry of Education, as alluded to in recommendation 77. In fact, recommendation 77 to revise the funding formula for school construction should be the first and foremost recommendation to remove physical and architectural barriers.

The School Condition Improvement (SCI) allocation would need to be increased in particular given that the "Beyond Building Code accessibility requirements" (recommendations 81 to 119) are being proposed for existing schools and other

educational facilities in addition to new school builds. It is well documented that retrofit requirements for existing buildings are substantially more costly than incorporating accessibility into new construction.

Members of Plant and Planning Services were quick to point out how quiet rooms and sensory rooms, referred to as "unloaded rooms" (that do not count towards the student capacity of the school), are often the first to go when asked by the Ministry "how can you reduce capital costs?" upon reviewing new school plans. It is important to note that capital funding constraints not only perpetuate physical barriers, but are also a function of systemic barriers related to the absence of meaningful accessibility considerations in the Ministry of Education funding formula.

Competing Priorities

It was also noted by members of Plant and Planning Services that many of the technical accessibility requirements are very prescriptive and appear to have been included without consideration for competing operational, safety and/or financial priorities. Specific examples of overly prescriptive and competing priorities are provided below:

- **Recommendation 81** to install heated paths of travel to the entrances of schools. Heated floors or pathways are considered a luxury item in private homes let alone for public schools. The operational implications for removing existing pathways, installing heated paths and repaving pathways across 222 YRDSB schools would be considerable. The increased financial implications become even more evident in doing a cost analysis between the installation, maintenance and hydro costs associated with heated paths compared to the cost of salt and human resources required to shovel and/or snowplow paths of travel during winter months.

- **Recommendation 95h** that requires at least two accessible stalls in each washroom to avoid long wait times. YRDSB is currently implementing its all-access washroom initiative whereby 36 schools were identified as requiring major renovations in order to accommodate an all-access washroom. A requirement to add two accessible stalls in every washroom would essentially require major renovations to now every YRDSB school, including moving walls,

plumbing, doorways, etc. The financial implications of this beyond Code recommendation would, again, be considerable.

- **Recommendation 102e** regarding weighted blankets is too prescriptive and can present safety issues. Weighted blankets are only one example of a sensory accommodation for some people with disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Additionally, a suitable weighted blankets has to be approved through a Board Occupational Therapist to meet specific requirements (usually 10% of the person's body weight). Sensory elements or objects should be recommended in general, rather than just the specific weighted blankets recommendation.

- **Recommendation 104b** regarding outdoor spaces. This sub-recommendation does not take into consideration that parcels of land for new YRDSB school builds are often inherited by the York Region municipality or township. The inherited lots have often been rejected by private builders due to large slopes, flood plains or other limitations with the land. School properties with large slopes between the school and school yard or playground are extremely difficult to make fully accessible (as noted in some existing YRDSB schools). Naturalization efforts for outdoor spaces is another competing interest that needs to be considered if major leveling or infrastructure is needed to make outdoor spaces fully accessible to everyone.

Accessibility Design Experts and Consultants

Feedback from the Plant and Planning Service also raised the following questions related to accessibility design experts and consultants referenced in recommendations 71, 72 and 79:

- Who would be considered to "have sufficient demonstrated expertise in accessibility design" as per recommendation 71?
- Similarly, who would be considered a "properly qualified and experienced accessibility consultant" as per recommendation 72?
- What are the industry and/or ministry standards for being considered an accessibility design experts or consultant?

- Given that the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification (RHFAC) was highlighted as "substantially inadequate and has significant problems", what are the alternative accessibility design standards or qualifications?
- Is there any sort of existing database of accessibility design experts and accessibility consultants available?

For consistency with implementation of the recommendations, it was suggested that a list or database of accessibility design experts and accessibility consultants be made available to school boards.

Additionally, assuming criteria for accessibility design experts are established, they should further have "sufficient demonstrated expertise in accessibility design" specific to school built environments. The Built Environment and Barrier Buster subcommittee are considered subject matter experts of school built environments, and noted how a number of recommendations appeared to be based on accessibility design in public settings (e.g., recessed fountains, floor mountain urinals, no labyrinth entrances into washrooms, tactile attention indicators, etc.). As outlined in the Education Act, a school is a highly regulated space and is not generally accessible to the public. There are unique considerations and competing proprieties that differ between school built environments and public spaces, such as shopping malls or restaurants.

Assistance Listening

A staff member of the Board's Deaf and Hearing department shared comprehensive feedback related to various references to assistive listening in the specific room requirements recommendations 101 through 112:

> "There was a great deal of reference to assistive listening, such as hearing loops. There are a variety of SEA tools used by students in the Board already. I have not encountered a hearing loop in any school thus far. Having assistive listening does not preclude that fact that some people with hearing loss will not hear a public address or speaking regardless of the technology or reduced background noise. Visual reinforcement is often necessary (e.g., school announcements that are visible on a screen as well as over PA system).

Assistive listening is referenced often but never defined [in the recommendations]. Hearing loops are one very finite example. Not all of those with hearing loss use hearing loops. Many use other strategies or technologies… Also many of the built environment recommendations address physical needs. Only in some cases was the acoustic environment of a space even mentioned. There are strategies that can be implemented at the building stage that can improve the acoustics and sound to noise ratio of a room. This should be considered at the building stage. Improved acoustics in rooms benefits all kinds of learners.

There was also no mention of accessibility of portables. The acoustics of portables, regardless of mitigation factors, are abysmal. Some of the equipment students use through SEA is not as effective in portables due to reverberation and background noise from ventilation systems and thin walls."

Conclusion by the Human Rights Commissioner

It has often being stated that education is the great equalizer. Our schools are the place where we first develop an understanding of the societal value placed on individuals. To this end, the concept of accessibility in education must embrace a human rights based approach in which we recognize that **all** students will have different needs at different times and in different circumstances. Students with disabilities are part of human diversity and humanity.

We commend the K-12 Education Standards Development Committee on completing the vital first phase in the work towards the development of new accessibility standards for K-12 education. The removal of barriers, both visible and invisible, that impede and marginalize K-12 students with disabilities in Ontario schools is critical to fostering inclusion so that students are able to fully benefit from Ontario's education system. The YRDSB's position, as expressed by the HRCO, is that accessibility can best be understood as a process of proactively identifying, removing and preventing barriers to people with and without disabilities. Indeed, this must be a student-centred approach where we actively consider and think about accessibility from the outset to ensure that nobody is excluded.

Meaningful accessibility can only be realized through a human rights based approach that recognizes the integral relationship between rights-holders and duty-bearers:

1. **Right-holders** are students with disabilities (those we serve in education) who need to be empowered to claim and exercise their rights; and

2. **Duty-bearers** are the educational system in general (and our Board in particular) which need to build capacity in order to fulfill our obligation to respect, protect, promote, and fulfil human rights, including disability rights.

While the proposed K-12 Education standards are an important first step, only recommendation 22 embodies a human rights based approach. A consistent theme throughout the report is the overly prescriptive nature of many recommendations, which overlook the core need for ongoing capacity building and addressing the fact that systemic ableism and attitudinal barriers continue to present the greatest obstacles for full participation and inclusion. Rather, many recommendations continue to perpetuate the compliance culture that is apparent throughout the other accessibility standards under the AODA.

To foster a culture of accessibility, the K-12 Education standards need to be more intentional and purposeful in drafting recommendations that promote a respect for dignity, difference and acceptance of disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity. It is our hope that greater attention will be accorded to the approach articulated in UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the eventual drafting of the K-12 Educational standards.

Sincerely,

Anthony Anirud
Human Rights Commissioner