



February 26, 2019

To the Honourable Ministers Thompson and MacLeod,

The Trustees of the Halton District School Board are gravely concerned about the changes to the Ontario Autism Program. There are almost 600 students in our board that have an autism identification. Each identified student has a unique profile and it is unknown how each of these students will be affected by the changes to the funding model. Our staff are currently in the process of surveying schools to try to more fully understand the impacts to our system. The school board does not know who is currently receiving funding through the Ontario Autism Program and at what level, and can therefore not accurately anticipate, nor put in place, the necessary resources and supports for these students, particularly with implementation beginning April 1, 2019.

As you know, there are children across the province and in our school board who currently receive very intensive and expensive autism-related therapies. Without the current government funding, many of these families will be unable to continue therapy at current levels. For example, some students may drop from 25+ hours of therapy per week to two hours per week under the new program. Presumably, students will spend some, if not all, of the rest of this time within publicly funded schools.

Minister Thompson, as a publicly funded board, we welcome all students. It is our responsibility to create inclusive spaces for all students and staff. We fear that the short notice of program change coupled with the lack of an implementation plan from the Ministry (with associated new funding) will not allow for the "safe and supportive classroom" that you have stated you are committed to. The Halton District School Board already spends \$20 million more than is allocated from the Ministry on Special Education due to the complex and rising needs of students. We are in fact already doing much more with much less. The resulting changes of the new Ontario Autism Program will make this situation absolutely untenable.

Minister Thompson, the Halton District School Board is anxiously awaiting more information from the Ministry. You have stated that the Ministry is "working with our school boards to make sure our proper supports are in place for the classroom" and as of February 25th, the staff at the school board have received no plans, funds or direction from the Ministry.

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Minister Thompson and Minister MacLeod, Trustees of the Halton District School Board encourage you to rethink this program change both in terms of the abbreviated timelines and, more importantly, in the approach to meeting the needs of children with Autism and their families. As a partner in this endeavour, Boards should be involved in this process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andréa Grebenc', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Andréa Grebenc
Chair of the Board of Trustees
Halton District School Board

Cc: Ontario Public School Board Association
Ontario Public School Board Chairs & Directors
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Stephen Crawford, MPP
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