

Should Toronto's school board phase out specialty programs?

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Like any big institution, the Toronto District School Board has problems with equity. And as at any big institution, those problems are familiar.

Put broadly, Toronto public schools are places where wealthy and/or white students are more likely to have their individual needs met, and succeed, while poor and/or Indigenous and black students are most likely to be suspended, and drop out. The playing field is not level.

And it's well-established that specialized programs are sites of that inequity, largely filled with Toronto's most privileged children (save those who go to private schools), the ones from homes stocked with art supplies, whose parents know how to successfully advocate for their kids.

Rectifying issues of inequality based on poverty, race and class is the goal of the board's Enhancing Equity Task Force, which recently released a proposal [to reform](#) programs for gifted students. That followed an earlier proposal to phase out specialized schools, including those focused on the arts, in favour of offering such programs more broadly across the city.

Parents of students in those programs didn't like the proposals, but moving toward integrating different types of learners is of the moment in public education. In 2016, the Ontario government [pledged](#) to put as diverse a range of students into the same classrooms as possible.

The core philosophy is that "different kids have different strengths and weaknesses," says Esther Geva, a professor of clinical psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "You don't want to put kids into boxes, you want them to learn from each other."

I also want them to have the same chances. At some TDSB schools, students who don't have computers at home must line up during limited library hours. This fall, an eight-year-old Ontario boy with behavioural issues was met with [an injected sedative](#) at school, instead of the supports that would help him.

Dr. Geva's focus is on language, and she points out that ESL students need up to six years to fully blossom, but get only two years of individual support.

Meanwhile, select nine-year-olds who score well on the TDSB's Grade 3 tests for the gifted program are set on an educational path of small classes, big ideas and broad possibilities.

I'm going to stick up for gifties, because I was one: I attended a TDSB gifted program for 11 years. "Bored" doesn't nearly describe how I felt in regular classes – it was more like distressingly frustrated and weepy. Some of my eventual classmates had disengaged to the point that they were tested for learning disabilities. Others were severely bullied. We needed special ed and the program generally helped me develop my independence, rather than stifling it.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. Those who say gifties can be snobby little know-it-alls are correct. And while big chunks of free time are great for those with innate self-discipline, a fair number of my classmates never got around to learning how to set goals and achieve them.

Maybe being around other, less introverted, students would have been helpful. As would spreading these programs around geographically, as I was bused far from home to a largely white school and had some pretty lonely summers.

There are 246,000 TDSB students, so it's reasonable to question whether so many different types of kids can really be taught in one classroom. Dr. Geva says it is possible, with caveats of course. Classes need to be small: My elementary classes were 20 students, max. Teachers need proper, ongoing training and everyone needs extra support.

And then, yes, it can work, says Dr. Geva, who knows a child on the autism spectrum who has a full-day assistant and "is doing fine" in a regular class, better than in an isolated group.

That assistant is paid for by the child's mother's entire salary. Though Ontario's 2016 special-education goal was supposed to be "an assistant in every classroom," Dr. Geva says, "it was a good idea that never happened."

Money, of course, is always the problem, but there used to be a fix. Before funding-formula changes under the Mike Harris government, individual municipalities could introduce educational levies. The Toronto board is the country's biggest and most diverse – it could use some flexibility.

Instead, faced with angry parents, the TDSB has walked back its language on phasing out specialized schools. It will likely do the same about gifted classes sooner than later. But streaming children is still imperfect, and not just because of fairness: Should a child with dyslexia who is a wonderful singer be in a music program, or special ed?

"It's hard to say let's have a school for this group over here and all you other groups go fight with each other," Dr. Geva says.

That's where we are right now, though, fighting over resources, privilege and political will. Not every child in Toronto has an equal chance to succeed – the choice is between committing fully to integration, or adding more weight to the well-worn creases of inequality.

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