



The Strategic Counsel

**For  
Ministry of Education**

**English-language Demonstration Schools and  
Robarts School for the Deaf – Consultation**

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Gregg, Kelly, Sullivan & Woolstencroft:  
The Strategic Counsel

[www.thestrategiccounsel.com](http://www.thestrategiccounsel.com)

21 St. Clair Avenue East  
Suite 800  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4T 1L9  
Tel 416 975-4465  
Fax 416 975-1883



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This report is a summary of comments made by participants in the consultations on English-language demonstration schools and Robarts School for the Deaf. Comments do not reflect the opinion of The Strategic Counsel or the Ministry of Education of Ontario. The accuracy of the information and data provided by the participants has not been verified by The Strategic Counsel or the Ministry of Education of Ontario.



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## I. Executive Summary



## Executive Summary

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### A Overview

*The Strategic Counsel* was retained by the Ministry of Education to consult with stakeholders to explore the program delivery model for students currently attending English-language Demonstration schools or the Robarts School for the Deaf.

The Ministry of Education asked for responses to three key questions:

- What knowledge and skills do English-language demonstration/Robarts School students need to have when they leave school?
- What are the best ways to prepare English-language demonstration/Robarts School students to enter the workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive and engaged citizens?
- Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for English-language demonstration school/Robarts students and their families?

A wide range of stakeholders participated in the consultation process, including:

- Parents and current/former students at all four schools;
- Teachers, staff, and managers at all four schools;
- Resource services;
- Appropriate school board representatives across the province; and
- Associations representing staff at the schools, the Deaf or hard of hearing and learning disabilities communities.

### B Summary of Comments

#### 1. Demonstration Schools

##### a) What knowledge and skills do English-language demonstration school students need to have when they leave school?

###### Critical Skills and Knowledge

All stakeholders want the English demonstration school students to acquire the following skills and knowledge:

- The ability to read (which enables them to successfully undertake other academic subjects);
- High level of self-confidence;
- Higher self-esteem;
- The ability to self-advocate;
- An understanding about their learning disability and ways to work with it;
- Basic social skills – conversation, ability to make friends, and conflict resolution;
- The capacity to be successful in high school and in their adult lives;
- Life skills; and
- Study, homework and school work skills.



### **Experiences Prior to Coming to a Demonstration School**

For almost all parents and students consulted, the acquisition of these skills was limited by their experience in the regular school system. Consequently, there are four basic issues that students and parents cite that led them to seek enrollment at demonstration schools.

- There were significant delays in identifying their reading and general learning difficulties;
- The response was typically ineffective and for a variety of reasons;
- Consequently, students fell further and further behind their peers; and
- This led to both learning and the development of social-emotional issues.

Parents attributed these issues to a lack of understanding, resources, capacity, and tools in their local schools to address the individual needs of students with severe learning disabilities.

### **b) What are the best ways to prepare demonstration school students to enter the workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive and engaged citizens?**

Many stakeholders identified the following core elements of the student experience at demonstration schools that help students make progress in addressing their learning challenges:

- Highly skilled/passionate teaching and support staff who specialize in teaching and supporting students with a severe LD;
- Congregating classes of students with **similar challenges related to their LD**;
- Use of effective intervention strategies (such as 200 minutes per day for reading and the use of the Empower reading program);
- Effective and intensive use of assistive technology that also allows for the ongoing monitoring of student progress;
- The small student-teacher in-class ratio (i.e., 5 to 7 students per teacher);
- Reinforcement of daily school learning by residential counsellors in the evenings; and
- Life skills development through the highly structured school and residential program.

Current students and their parents reported significant progress in students' reading and social skills. Within a few months, students jumped several grade levels in their reading skills. This view was supported by teachers who also observed significant student progress, based on ongoing evaluation.

Among former demonstration school students attending the consultation sessions, virtually all of them reported success in their post-demonstration school experience, both socially and academically. Some of them reported that they had graduated from university. This success, they said, was a result of their experience at the demonstration school. This is noteworthy given their previous challenges at their regular school prior to attending the demonstration school. Even when students had setbacks, they reported using the learning tools and strategies they developed at demonstration schools.

There was a general desire across the demonstration schools for research to track the progress of former students once they left a demonstration school.

### **c) Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for demonstration school students and their families?**

Many consultation participants identified the following as important programs and services:

- Demonstration schools are critical to developing effective practices and a source of knowledge transfer to the school boards;
- Demonstration schools are able to effectively support students with severe LDs where this may be a challenge for under-resourced school boards;
- Specialized teaching focused on individual learning styles for students with severe LDs;



- The residential program is a key component in supporting students with severe LDs;
- 18 hours/5 days per week immersion;
- Being with a peer group with similar difficulties assists in developing positive self-esteem and self-advocacy skills that helps in future studies and life beyond;
- Assistive technology is key, but requires trained teachers and adequate IT support; and
- Every school board should seriously consider the use of Empower.

### **Overview of School Boards' Capacity to Serve Students with Severe Learning Disabilities**

Across Ontario, school boards vary in their ability to support students with a learning disability and especially a severe LD. Some boards do not distinguish between the severities of learning disabilities, while some do. Further, some boards have congregated classes for students with a severe LD, while others integrate students and use a withdrawal approach of varying durations and frequency.

Many school board staff indicated that capacity building is needed to best support students with severe LDs and that they rely on one of the demonstration schools. There were also a number of comments by board educators that the issue was compounded where teachers, principals, and school board leadership teams need to develop a better understanding of the complexities surrounding teaching and supporting students with severe LDs.

Many school board staff believe that further supports are needed to help students with severe LDs.

Overall, school board staff spoke to three areas of support from demonstration schools:

1. Transferring of knowledge and expertise through resources, workshops and other types of outreach;
2. Boosting of school board expertise by capitalizing on teachers' experience when they return from secondments at demonstration schools; and
3. Continuing to admit students with severe LDs who have not responded to, or made progress through, school board programs and services.

## **2. Robarts School for the Deaf**

### **a) What knowledge and skills do Robarts School students need to have when they leave school?**

The Robarts School for the Deaf stakeholders identified the following core skills and knowledge:

- Robarts' students should have the same skills and knowledge as other Ontario students;
- Developing bilingual language capabilities;
- Developing a cultural Deaf identity and an ability to participate in Deaf culture; and
- Development of self-esteem, confidence, ability to self-advocate and leadership skills.

### **Experience Prior to Coming Robarts School**

According to some stakeholders, students' experience prior to attending Robarts is compounded by factors that have emerged over the past few decades and that have changed the education of Deaf or hard of hearing students. Participants believed these developments have also had an impact on the type of student that is attending Robarts and their experiences prior to coming to the school.

There were generally three types of situations that brought students to Robarts:

- Parents' desire for their child to be educated in an ASL environment;
- Where the child has failed or struggled to develop a first language and needs to develop language; and
- Where the student has multiple exceptionalities, including being Deaf or hard of hearing, and the regular school has limited resources.



In addition to the above, there were also a number of comments made by current and former parents and students of the Robarts School about their prior experiences.

- Limited information and knowledge about ASL as an option for their child;
- Limited opportunities for parents and children to learn ASL as a first language;
- At school boards, teachers not sufficiently trained to teach to Deaf or hard of hearing students;
- Without proper support, Deaf or hard of hearing students easily misunderstand what is being taught;
- Lack of academic achievement and success;
- That the technology for Deaf or hard of hearing students does not always ensure hearing well enough to comprehend;
- Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing can become isolated and socially disconnected with other students. Bullying and harassment occurs; and
- Interpreters are not properly trained as they aren't teachers and that the meaning is often lost or difficult to explain.

**b) What are the best ways to prepare demonstration/Robarts School students to enter the workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive and engaged citizens?**

A number of themes emerged from the input heard:

- Robarts was viewed as a key pathway to being a productive and engaged citizen;
- Robarts students need to be fluent in their first language (ASL) and develop a bilingual literacy capacity;
- Being exposed to the Deaf community, culture, and role models is essential for the development of self-identity and self-esteem;
- Incorporate speech training into the Robarts curriculum as well as ASL;
- Early childhood acquisition of language skills is critical to long-term success; and
- Teaching ASL to Deaf or hard of hearing families is viewed as highly important.

**Elements that Make the Robarts School Effective**

Different groups identified a number of core factors contributing to the success of the Robarts School:

1. A peer group with similar Deaf or hard of hearing challenges;
2. A vibrant social environment;
3. Dedicated and specialized teachers who are completely focused on students who are Deaf or hard of hearing;
4. Small class size;
5. Ability to participate in Deaf culture;
6. The primary language of instruction is ASL;
7. Supportive and motivating environment; and
8. Technology aimed at meeting the needs of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

**c) Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for Robarts students and their families?**

One of the key issues here was that Robarts, similar to other provincial schools for the Deaf, has declining enrollment. Many believed that this was not just due to parents opting for implants and oral language development, but that ASL was often not offered as an option to parents or offered as a backup if oral language skills failed to develop.





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Increasing the enrollment through clearer communications about ASL as a first language option was perceived as an important step to creating a more robust student body.

At the same time, school board staff stated that due to the lack of demand they have few ASL resources. There appeared to be the critical mass to have instruction in ASL in only one or two boards.

For most boards, itinerant teachers supported those students with cochlear implants or other types of hearing devices. In most cases, these students were integrated into mainstream classes and withdrawn on an as-needed basis.

Board staff and students give a mixed review of the performance of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Some students appear to function well, while others struggle. Boards commented that those struggling are provided with additional resources or supports, but they again report mixed results.

## C Conclusion

In conclusion, one educator made an observation that applies to students in both the demonstration schools and Roberts School for the Deaf:

*“Regardless what happens to us, the Ministry needs to have a plan for these kids.” – Demonstration School Teacher*



## II. Introduction



## Introduction

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### A Consultation Objective

The objective of the consultation process was to engage in a dialogue with the different stakeholders of the three demonstration schools – Trillium, Amethyst, and Sagonaska – and the Robarts School for the Deaf.

### B Consultation Approach Details

A wide range of stakeholders were included in the consultation process. At the four schools, the following were consulted in separate sessions:

- Current students and parents;
- Former students and parents;
- Management at each school;
- Teachers and support staff;
- Robarts' Resource Services staff;
- Representatives of the bargaining units representing school staffs; and
- Residential staff at the three English-language demonstration schools.

In addition, groups external to the four schools that had an interest in the schools, or were special education experts, were consulted and this included:

- Associations representing the Deaf and hard of hearing;
- Associations representing those with a learning disability; and
- The Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education.

Finally, consultations were held with schools boards representing all regions of the province:

- London and southwestern Ontario;
- Ottawa and eastern Ontario;
- Thunder Bay and north-western Ontario;
- North Bay and north-eastern Ontario;
- Toronto region; and
- Barrie and central Ontario.

The consultation was built around three key questions.

For the English-language demonstration schools consultation, the questions were:

- What knowledge and skills do English demonstration school students need to have when they leave school?
- What are the best ways to prepare demonstration school students to enter the workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive and engaged citizens?
- Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for demonstration school students and their families?



Similarly, for the Robarts School for the Deaf consultation the questions were:

- What knowledge and skills do we want Robarts students to have when they leave school?
- What are the best ways to prepare Robarts students to enter the workforce, post secondary education or other pathways and become productive and engaged citizens?
- Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for Robarts students and their families?

## C Specific Consultation Approaches

### 1. Parents and Students

Consultations were held at each of the four schools in scope. Parents with a child registered at each of the schools were invited to attend, with or without the student present. In many cases, students attended with their parents. Former students and parents were also invited to attend as part of a separate session.

### 2. Staff

At the three demonstration schools, breakout groups were also held in order to ensure that all staff had a chance to provide input.

### 3. Management, Bargaining Agents, Associations, MACSE, Provincial Schools Resource Services

Three in-person sessions took place (management, bargaining agents, Deaf and hard of hearing associations). Three were undertaken via a conference call (Learning disability associations, MACSE and resource services). In the case of the associations representing the Deaf and hard of hearing and resource services, interpreters were also present.

### 4. School Boards

A variety of approaches were used with school boards. This included: in person, conference calls and a combination of a facilitator in person and a conference call. In some cases, breakout sessions took place where students were present (Barrie, Toronto). The remainder were conducted as one session.

#### Structure of the Report

As noted above, the report follows the three broad questions set out in the discussion papers on the Ministry of Education website.

The following structure has been adopted related to each question:

#### 1. What knowledge and skills do Demonstration/Robarts School students need to have when they leave school?

This section includes a number of elements:

- Identification of skills and knowledge parents and students believe the provincial and demonstration schools and schools generally should provide to students to succeed in life;
- Experience of students in the regular school system prior to attending a provincial or demonstration school. This includes difficulty learning and issues with social emotional behaviour.
- For the Robarts School, issues around first language acquisition.

#### 2. What are the best ways to prepare Demonstration/Robarts School students to enter the workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive and actively engaged citizens?



In this section, all the questions that deal with the programs and experiences provided at the Robarts School and the demonstration schools are included, along with comments related to the transition from the demonstration schools to school boards.

**3. Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for Demonstration/Robarts School students and their families?**

Here the focus is three fold:

- The identification of the program and experience elements provided by the Robarts and demonstration schools;
- The programs and services provided by school boards for students with LDs or who are Deaf or hard of hearing; and
- The relationship between the provincial and demonstration schools and school boards, including exposure, awareness and use of services and use of services.



### III. English Language Demonstration Schools



## English Language Demonstration Schools

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### 1. What knowledge and skills do English demonstration school students need to have when they leave school?

#### a) Feedback from Consultations at the Demonstration Schools

Consistent across all parent and student groups, parents and students seek to achieve the following skills and knowledge from the students' experience at a demonstration school and post demonstration school:

- The ability to read (which enables them to successfully undertake other academic subjects);
- High level of self-confidence;
- Higher self-esteem;
- The ability to self-advocate;
- An understanding of their learning disability and effective learning strategies;
- Basic social skills – conversation, ability to make friends, and conflict resolution;
- The capacity to be successful in high school and in their adult lives;
- Life skills; and
- Study, homework and work skills.

These areas of focus were mirrored in the comments by participants in the online consultation survey.

The rationale for these expectations is consistent among parents and students across the three demonstration schools.

#### b) Experience Prior to Attending a Demonstration School

In most cases, students were considerably behind in their ability to read. It was not unusual for some to report that, as an early teen and upon entry to the school, they were assessed at a Grade 1 reading level.

Further, most parents and students reported that the student often had significant socio-emotional issues. In many cases, this was attributed to the consequences of not being able to read. Students reported having feelings of low self-worth, of having few friends, and being bullied because of their learning disability. Others reported low attendance because of a dislike of school, largely because of the treatment by other students or feeling "dumb." Still others reported considering dropping out. And, in fact, many students and parents report believing that they would have dropped out eventually if they had not been placed at the demonstration school.

There were three basic issues that students and parents cited:

- There were significant delays in identifying the learning disability;
- The response was typically ineffective for a variety of reasons;
- Consequently, students fell further and further behind, in some cases exacerbating both learning and social/emotional issues.

Each of these issues will be addressed below.

#### i) Problem Identification

Both parents and students indicated that the child's learning disability was often not identified early on, and there was an inadequate response after it was diagnosed.

Many parents observed that that they were aware of a serious gap in learning when their child was in kindergarten or grade 1 or 2. Parents often spoke about their frustrations with the regular school not being able to adequately respond to the learning needs of their child with LD.

To parents, teachers in the home school did not have the time to address their son or daughter's specific needs.



In addition, many parents and students noted that there was difficulty at the home school in identifying a student's learning disability. Often, this was occurring when the student was already falling well behind their peer group in their reading. In some cases, the students were three to four grades below their grade in terms of reading.

*"I think it was around grade 3 that I started noticing that I was falling behind in reading and spelling. The teachers were having a very hard time. I was picking up on visual things, remembering things. It wasn't till grade 6 when I finally had testing done. So, I'm getting the testing done and I was put in a slow learners class and that frustrated me so much because I wasn't like that, and I didn't understand because I'm not like that. It wasn't till grade 9 that I came here and, of course, I was an angry person. I remember cussing and biting, and I was just wild. I tried tutoring; I tried at home extra learning. I came here doing the tests and the teachers that were involved in teaching me. I came here and I started at a grade 1 reading level, and within two years I was up to grade 9." – Former Demonstration School Student*

Other parents noted that their son or daughter did not get testing until grade 4 or later.

Some parents also reported taking issue with the efficacy of the assessment. For example, one parent mentioned that their child's application to a demonstration school was initially rejected because the assessments from their school were "sloppy". The child was eventually accepted after external testing produced a proper diagnosis of the child's severe learning disability.

Parents also made the point that even when testing was undertaken and an Individual Education Plan (IEP) developed, some parents report that it was not properly implemented.

#### **ii) Response to the Severe LDs**

Once a learning disability was identified, parents often believed the response was inadequate or did not work. At a high level, parents of both current and former demonstration school students asserted that regular school boards tend to lack the "resources, capabilities, and tools" to address students with severe LDs' learning needs.

A variety factors were identified by parents:

- The lack of qualified special education teachers;
- The lack of effective specialized programs that could address a severe LD;
- That when assistive technology was introduced, it was often done poorly or inadequately without training for the teacher and student on how to use the technology;
- Teachers could not provide individualized attention because they have too many students with IEPs;
- Students were often assigned to smaller classes with behavioral problems;
- If implemented, remedial programs were not effective; and
- IEPs were used as a way to move students along, without addressing the core problems.

There was broad consensus that not all teachers in the regular school system have the time or skills to help students with severe LDs. A number of parents noted that teachers have so many IEPs to deal with they find it difficult to address the learning challenges that students with severe LDs face.

However, it was not just that parents believed the schools were not able to help, many parents noted that hiring tutors or sending kids to reading camps or private classes for students with LDs also didn't work. Some tried private schools. And, again, all of them reported limited comparative success. The following quotes provide a summary of the observations about their experiences prior to coming to a demonstration school.

*"I was fortunate to get into an LD class at home, but it still didn't work. Everyone was at a different level in the LD class. So, I didn't make any progress but still ended up being moved and placed into a mainstream class." – Current Demonstration School Student*





*"I was always stuck in the resource room and half the time the resource teacher wasn't there. I was there just myself or they'd put me in the library. I never had friends. I would hide in the bathroom. I felt like nobody cared."* – Current Demonstration School Student

*"From grade 2 to 4 they kept testing us to split out LD students from the others....but it wasn't until grade 7 till they dealt with LD kids.....three years they did nothing about LD students."* – Current Demonstration School Student

*"In Grade 9, I am trying to get my work done, but still in Grade 10 there was progress, and they put me in a special class, and they gave me a special laptop, and then that laptop broke and it took 8 months to get me a new one."* – Current Demonstration School Student

### **iii) Reading and Self-Esteem**

Most participants noted this lack of reading skills had cascading impact on other academic subjects, although some parents noted that while their son or daughter might not be able to read, they were sometimes good at other subjects such as arithmetic or art.

Moreover, these students were promoted from grade to grade without meeting grade-level curriculum expectations. This meant that the gap between the student and his peer groups increased as the student moved from one grade to the next.

As a consequence, the students' mindset was not positive – low self-esteem, depression, isolation, low confidence, and small or non-existent social circles (there were some exceptions where some students were athletes enabling them to establish a stronger social network). Students openly acknowledged that they would become "*trouble makers*" in the classroom.

The following quotes provide a flavour of the students' recollections about their emotional state, related to their classroom experience, prior to coming to a demonstration school.

*"Nobody really understood why you were "stupid" because you couldn't do the work they wanted you to. You were being put to the back of the class and forgot about."* – Former Demonstration School Student

*"I was being bullied by teachers and students being called stupid and dumb. I was asked why I didn't just stay home."* – Former Demonstration School Student

*"Before I came here, I tried to hide myself by being a goof ball to try and hide my disability."* - Former Demonstration School Student

*"At my old school, I was bullied every single day since third grade. It was not great for me because I felt bullied. I was bullied because kids thought I was dumb."* – Current Demonstration School Student

*"In high school, my social life was really hard because I couldn't read most of the letters. The only place I could go was the park because this was the only place there was no reading. Even the restaurant I can't go because I have to read the menu and it was really hard for me."* – Current Demonstration School Student

*"Without here, I wouldn't want to go to any school. I would stay home. Here, I feel proud of my work."* – Current Demonstration School Student

In summary, the barriers to learning, at least as identified by parents and students at the demonstration schools, were two-fold:

- A failure to identify the problem early enough; and
- Limited effective programs and resources available to assist students with severe learning disabilities.



As noted, many parents believed that the failure to identify the problem and respond at an early age exacerbated some of the social/emotional issues experienced by students.

An issue brought up by teaching and residential staff rather than parents was Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and that for some students this was a compounding factor in terms of their learning disability.

## 2. What are the best ways to prepare Demonstration School students with severe learning disabilities to enter the workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive and actively engaged citizens?

*"What makes this place unique – reading, focus on shedding stigma, building character, mantras on the wall, gratitude is my attitude. Stay with it. Make lemonade out of lemons. Character traits are celebrated within peers." – Demonstration School Teacher*

### a) Overview

All groups agreed that the primary purpose of the demonstration schools is to teach students how to read.

The following summarizes the views of the schools' staff and management:

*"These are not just learning disabled students. These are severely learning disabled students. These are the most difficult to serve students. We were working with a student who was at grade one reading level." - Demonstration School Management*

*"Trillium School has 40 students. We teach kids to read. For the 1% of students who will be adults who will turn out as illiterate adults, we are the ones who can reverse that." – Demonstration School Teacher*

*"If the teachers who are taking special education courses could see what's happening (at the demonstration schools), it's eye opening to see what's happening, there and how students (at the schools) are learning." - Special education consultant*

In addition, all stakeholders believe it is imperative to work on the social and emotional issues that many of the students have in order to be able to teach them to become effective readers.

All of the groups consulted at the schools agree that the students arrive at the schools, exhibiting:

- Low self-esteem;
- Limited confidence; and
- Feeling isolated and defeated.

### b) Effectiveness of Demonstration Schools

All groups consulted believed that demonstration schools were highly effective in preparing students with severe LDs to be productive and engaged citizens once they leave these schools. This belief was also strongly expressed in the online consultation survey.

Almost all current/former students and their parents remarked on the progress made in reading. Many reported entering at a grade 1 or 2 reading level and, over the course of one or two years, making considerable progress.

*"I came to Amethyst with a grade 3 reading level and now am at a grade 7. I feel really good about this. I think I will be at the grade 9 level by the end of the year." – Current Demonstration School Student*



*"I think the thing that has helped me the most here is my reading — I started at a grade 2 level and now I am at grade 6/7. I feel much better. At the beginning of the year, I was nervous that people were better than me at reading. This school has helped me a lot." – Current Demonstration School Student*

*"My son has gone from reading at a grade 1 level to a grade 8 level. He is now reading books and has developed a love for reading. The school has been fantastic for him." – Current Demonstration School Parent*

*"They [students] are now learning the prescribed curriculum for the grade they are in. Before, they were not learning it." – Current Demonstration School Parent*

A point that a number of educators and administrators across the schools made was around the ability to demonstrate the effectiveness of the reading strategies adopted by the schools. A number made reference to research undertaken by a school psychologist:

*"The Empower program states [that] if used properly, students can see a three to four point gain. Last year, our kids made 12-15 point gains. Our psychologist redid all the stats because he couldn't believe it. In his opinion, the progress here is some of the strongest in the world." – Demonstration School Management*

### **c) Elements that Make the Demonstration School Program Effective**

Participant groups identified a number of elements that contribute to demonstration school success with students with severe learning disabilities.

They can be summarized as follows:

- The theoretical model that underpins the demonstration school model;
- The student selection process;
- The ongoing evaluations throughout the school year;
- The classroom experience;
- The teachers, support staff and residential staff;
- The use of assistive technology; and
- The residential experience.

#### **i) The Theoretical Model (Why It Works)**

Psychologists/psychiatrists, in some of the school consultation sessions, provided a rationale for the demonstration schools' success. They outlined the reasons why the schools are successful in terms of neuroscience and why it is difficult for a school board school to replicate all the elements. These specialists noted the growing understanding of the neuroplasticity of the brain. In short, repetitive activities can forge new neural pathways and that this could be applied to learning and learning for students with severe learning disabilities. In their view, students with severe LDs have not developed the neural pathways that allow reading to easily take place and so these have to be created.

*"The program was restructured around the concept of neuroplasticity ... Learning to read has to have intensity, 200 minutes a day of direct instruction per day. The prime function of a student being here is to teach them to read. The brain has to be reprogrammed through long periods of repetition. This results in the rebuilding or establishing the neuropathway." – Demonstration School Psychologist*

#### **ii) The Student Selection Process**

Another factor behind the success of the demonstration schools is the student selection process which was described by everyone as "rigorous" and "very selective."



*"It's a daunting task to go through all the requirements to be accepted into the program - it's a huge binder. One of the requirements is an assessment of disabilities, and it's not uncommon for some families to never go any further than that and so the learning difficulties are never addressed properly. It's a strain on some families to meet all of the requirements, because of the different assessments that are required, but many are so happy to see the progress in the end, they feel it was all worth it and they are glad they did it." – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

Managers, teachers and other staff also reported that the school will only select students they feel can benefit from the program. They cited this as the reason for the lengthy assessment process. For example, if students act out due to behavioural issues, they are typically not accepted. This results in a lengthy application process and in long waiting lists for students applying to the school.

*"We only take in students that would be successful here." – Demonstration School Management*

### **iii) Ongoing Student Assessment throughout the School Year**

Prior to students starting at the school, managers and other staff report that a student's application is extensively reviewed and scores analysed in detail.

Once the baseline assessment is conducted in September, frequent follow-up evaluations are conducted throughout the school year. The student is an active member of the process. They create an advocacy card. Each student writes what they need to be successful at when they leave. In this way, self-advocacy is taught and developed. Every student does a presentation to sell themselves. This is an opportunity for the student to show what they need and the creation of this can be stressful. At school, and in residence, the students have a transition program that covers what they can expect and how to deal with it. The transition program usually requires 4-6 sessions. From day one, the student lives and is immersed in the transition process.

Further, when students arrive their learning style is reviewed and, from this and their test scores, a program developed:

*"Specifically, we do a binder for each student before the student arrives. So, from our first day we have access to those binders. Before we even meet students, we understand a bit about their specific needs before the school year even starts. We can then tailor their program." – Demonstration School Teacher*

*"Upon student entry, staff reviews learning style, psychological reports. All can see their learning style. Then, a program is developed." - Demonstration School Residential Counsellor*

*"If a student has not made any progress in two months, we get worried and take action." - Demonstration School Management*

*"The first week is team building, and we do a lot of reading assessment - understand reading target, accuracy, fluency. We know every students reading level by the end of second week and can individualize programs. We do running records every two to three weeks to guide." - Demonstration School Teacher*

*"We meet with the students every week and test them on a new passage and that is how they move up in levels with accuracy with words per minute and pronunciation." - Demonstration School Teacher*

At the same time, teachers are able to track student's performance on a daily basis through the use of assistive technology.

*"With the Lexia program being used at night as part of homework, I can check my students' stats daily on my phone. I can address any issues immediately. I know specifically what a student is having problems with." – Demonstration School Teacher*



One of the other key parts of the demonstration school experience, and as alluded to above, is goal setting. This is done on a weekly basis using a program called goal tracker. Activities toward goals are reviewed regularly.

*“On a weekly basis, goals are set, but it could be a month before a student meets a goal. So, staff communicates on what a student is working on and strategies to reach goals.”* – Demonstration School Residential Counsellor

*“The end goal is to get students to meet goals on their own, independently.”* – Demonstration School Residential Counsellor

Teachers, residential counsellors and management underscored the importance of the rigorous student evaluation process in achieving positive outcomes.

#### **iv) The Classroom Experience**

Stakeholders identified several dimensions of the classroom experience that appear to assist students to learn to read:

- The skill and motivation of the teaching staff;
- Class size;
- Programs, immersion and structure; and
- IEPs.

##### *Skill and Motivation of the Teaching Staff*

All groups underscored the effectiveness and uniqueness of the teaching environment. Many stakeholders pointed to the motivation and skill of the demonstration school teachers.

*“I have taught in Toronto and abroad. This is the most rewarding place to work because of what you can achieve with the students. I just saw a grown woman cry because she witnessed her child reading for the first time.”* – Demonstration School Teacher

*“I’ve been mostly in special education before coming here. I feel very fortunate to be here. I thought I had a solid understanding of the difference between LD and severe LD and the full spectrum. But, students here have severe disabilities, and sometimes identified from grade 1, and they’re the hardest to serve in the province. They come here and we provide specialized training and we see results in these extreme cases and I feel rewarded that I can provide that.”* – Demonstration School Teacher

*“Every day I come to work feeling very privileged to be part of this team. We are making a difference in kid’s lives that need it. Coming from a high school background where teachers don’t know how to support LD learners, they are shoved to the back of the class. But here, I have lots of support from other staff and teach kids how to read and self-advocate. It’s a magical place. It’s opened my eyes as to what can happen when the proper channels are put into place.”* – Demonstration School Teacher

In part, the quotes above reflect the teacher selection process. A number of demonstration school administrators made the point that teachers were seconded for up to four years from boards in the area and that there were far more applicants for positions than available positions. This allowed administrators to pick very carefully the teachers that they wanted at the schools.

*“Here, we choose teachers because they’re seconded.... Here we collaborate with teachers, cafeteria staff. And, that freedom allows us to be extremely precise working with students. Teachers here are so focused on achievement. Twice a month we sit down with the whole team: psychologists, teachers etc and look at how they move forward with students.”* – Demonstration School Management

*“We’re looking for people with passion to come in and work. What they get here that they don’t have in a regular school is self-advocacy. It’s very difficult to get satisfaction in a regular school because student growth is very slow; tiny steps at a time. Kids gain and flourish, self-advocacy skills moves so*



*quickly here. It makes my staff insatiable. If a barrier is hit, my teachers become obsessed with figuring out the solution to help a kid move forward.” – Demonstration School Management*

The other element is that teachers meet with each other and the residence counsellors frequently to review progress and strategies. Also of importance, and cited frequently, is the extensive opportunities for informal professional development.

*“I’m a new teacher here and it feels phenomenal. I’m learning strategies here I wish I could have applied to my old job in the regular school system. Kids say they’ve avoided work or leave the classroom and I’m learning strategies on how to deal with these issues. New info is being thrown at me and I’m trying to absorb it all.” – Demonstration School Teacher*

*“In my three years here, I’ve worked harder and learned more than in previous years. How do we get it out there? I’m sitting in a course right now with a bunch of special education consultants and they’re asking me questions on what they should be doing?” – Demonstration School Teacher*

#### *Class Size*

Having class sizes with 5 to 8 students per teacher was viewed as key by all groups consulted.

It was the view of all groups that small class size facilitates the learning process because it enables the teachers to provide individual attention to students.

As noted by teachers and counsellors, demonstration school students have unique learning styles and needs.

#### *Programs, Immersion and Structure*

All groups – parents, teachers, and residential counsellors – point to the success of the demonstration schools program to the deep immersion of the students – 5 days a week, 18 hours per day.

*“200 minutes of direct focus literacy will allow the students to move forward in a way that the public schools can’t.” – Demonstration School Teacher*

*“We’re teaching how to decode using five different strategies. Fluency in classroom is supported as well by residence counsellors. So, again, going back to constant reinforcement of students’ programs.”  
Demonstration School Teacher*

*“Also they have 20-30 min per day of the Lexia program.” – Demonstration School Teacher*

All groups strongly believed that reading intervention programs such as Empower (designed by Sick Kids Hospital) had a significant impact on the students’ reading ability.

Parents, teachers and residential counsellors report that they see progress very quickly – sometimes as early as October, but more commonly by November and December of the school year. This progress is noteworthy, given the significant challenges students faced in their schooling up to that point.

*“This is an intensive environment. The students and staff often reported being amazed at the progress. Since staff let the student know how far they’ve come, the progress encourages the student to be more engaged as a result. It was noted by a number of staff that nothing builds success like success. Teachers build a sense of empowerment in students through programs like the reading program. Teachers made the point that the program is not just about reading, it’s also social, involving all-day activities.” – Demonstration School Management*

#### *Use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs)*

IEPs at demonstration schools are viewed as important to students’ progress.

Upon arrival at the demonstration school, IEPs are reviewed and rewritten for students. The new IEPs are very specific to the student’s individual needs. It is a document that is constantly being reviewed and updated.



The student is an active participant in the process, building understanding of their learning disability and how to work with it.

**v) Assistive Technology**

Extensive use of assistive technology was widely viewed to be highly effective in helping demonstration school students achieve positive outcomes. This perspective was highlighted among those individuals who participated in the online survey.

Different stakeholders noted that teachers are trained to use assistive technology to ensure its effective use in classroom instruction. Students also have access to support which helps them maximize the use of the technology to achieve their educational objectives.

The following quotes outline the different perspectives about the impact of assistive technology in facilitating success:

*“Google classroom is used here a lot. It's great and provides easy access for the students. They can use it to go on and check notes from teachers. As another example, a student was making progress with an e-reading program and got stuck and didn't advance for a couple of weeks. The teacher reported that the student needed some more help to get past it. A counselor can spend more time and use different strategies to help.”* – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor

*“The technology is good for things like homework consistency. A teacher can go into Lexia and see how much time they're spending on assignments. Communication with teachers, etc. is a really big help. Sometimes kids “forget” what homework they have. They can't get away with that now. If staff is struggling on an issue in the evening, they can text the teacher. This communication can't be replicated in a normal school setting.”* – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor

*“Every teacher and course is different, some really encourage the technology, and how to use it, others teach them how to get around the difficulties when the technologies are not available. It gives them the systems and tools to use, and they have access to it to assist themselves. Some of the assignments are designed to be completed on computers, such as essays and how to use the assistive technology that's available to them. It's very gratifying to see how they can prove they are learning the information that is being taught to them. A student may only be able to write at a grade 8 level but, with speech to text technology, they can 'write' the scientific terminology at a grade 10 level and show they really do know the information. If the students learn that the technology exists to assist them, they learn how to ask for these systems when they return back home and to regular school. They are taught and encouraged that there is a grant available to them if they wish to continue to use these learned technologies. But, we also teach them how to do the work when the technology is not available to use.”* – Demonstration School Teacher

*“The technology here is a huge help. The people who work here know how the technology works so they can really help us. At my regular school, I wouldn't have figured any of that out.”* – Current Demonstration School Student

*“The tech guy in the school will go to the students and introduce them to the programs for them to use for the whole year.”* – Demonstration School Teacher

Demonstration schools staff and students also report the extensive use of a wide variety of learning-related apps and that there is great interest in discovering and testing new ones.

Some of the programs and apps cited include – speech to text & text to speech, mind mapping apps- organize ideas, and book creators- helps make presentations.

Teachers also reported posting presentations and allowing students to video how the teacher completes the steps and then they can look back at the steps.



*“Kids use a lot of Ipad or iphone- speech to text, speech recognition is better with apple and speech detection. Some students will use all three devices in class. They may use a computer because it’s easier than looking up words on their phones or ipads.” – Demonstration School Residential Counsellor*

*“Tech game plan- the idea that we need to expose the students to a variety of tools. They show the kids all the different tools and apps and then allow them to choose what they will use. It helps level the playing field for when they get back to school.” – Demonstration School Teacher*

In fact, one indication of the success of the assistive technology is that demonstration schools staff report that some students returned to their own board schools and were able to train their teachers to use the assistive technology.

#### **vi) Residential Experience**

##### *Overview*

In the view of all groups consulted, the residential program was seen as key to the students’ success in improving their reading ability and self-worth. This point was clearly echoed in the online survey.

In the view of consultation participants, the success of the residential program rests on two broad elements:

- Reinforcing classroom learning; and
- Students acquiring life skills, self-esteem, and self-advocacy.

Residence staff described a wide variety of activities they offer to help students overcome their social and emotional challenges:

- Consistently giving positive reinforcement to students in terms of their achievements;
- Teaching students how to advocate for themselves;
- Engaging students in a range of extra-curricular activities that also build confidence. This could include sports activities as well as trips to learn to buy food, follow a recipe and cook a meal;
- Encouraging students to work together and to work with them in resolving disagreements;
- Identifying areas of stress and difficulty for students and providing opportunities for them to develop coping skills;
- Creating a safe, non-judgemental environment; and
- Giving students more knowledge about their LD to develop self-acceptance.

Within this context, students feel comfortable in this environment because they are interacting with peers with similar experiences and in a similar situation. As a result, counsellors report students do not see themselves as different. One current student noted that by being surrounded by others like themselves, they discover *“for the first time”* that they are not alone.

The following quotes outline the different perspectives about the impact of the residential program on students:

*“So, no one has talked much about the residence part. Residence has taught us social skills and how to communicate. Kids get bribed by their parents, and kids will do what they are asked to get something. Here they don’t bribe us and we still do what we have to do. What’s in it for me? A better future.”*  
– Current Demonstration School Student

*“They teach the kids about LD and they teach them how do manage their LD for the rest of their lives.”*  
– Current Demonstration School Parent

*“We give them the knowledge of their disabilities. Tell them what they have. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. They learn to accept it and build from it.”* – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor

*“This is a safe environment. Most kids coming from a home school have been bullied and have low self-esteem. Kids feel safe and confident when they leave the residence for school each morning. We*





*provide a safe environment. Some parents don't have time or the tools to provide this themselves. Here, kids are nurtured through their difficult times.” – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

*“We transition them to having part-time jobs in the summer time, to ordering an item from a menu, to money matters. They don't have the basic skills we take for granted.” – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

*“We are a complete immersion program for social and life skills.” – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

*“They have a voice here. We want to be able to teach students to believe in themselves and advocate for themselves. Right now, they are just not being taught the way they need to be taught in regular schools.” – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

*“We are teaching them life skills, etiquette, social skills, and recreation life - a life in balance. We teach them how to balance all of life's requirements into a productive and balanced life. We help them build a more positive outlook in life. Many come from homes where they were not encouraged, or they were yelled at, or just left alone. Because of their learning disabilities, they don't always read social skills or take social cues well. They don't understand them or see them because they were never taught to understand these. We are able to help and coach them on how to react in a positive manner. We teach them how to resolve problems with conflict resolutions, and problem solving, how to deal with issues that arise, in a constructive and positive manner. We show them that these problems/conflicts will arise in everyday life, how they can learn to deal with them, and live a well-rounded life. We teach them how to deal with bullying, depending on themselves instead of going to a teacher or parent.” – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

#### **d) Medication**

Residence staff also believe that a part of problem is that, in addition to a severe LD, many students coming to the school have undiagnosed ADHD and that this compounds having a severe LD. In fact, one participant commented that 32 of the 42 students at the school are on medication for ADHD.

Further, some commented that the school or the parents/guardians had not recognized the ADHD, in part, because they did not have the expertise.

Staff also report that the school nurses at the demonstration schools closely monitor the medication dosages given to each of the students. They also commented that some students coming to the schools on medication were taking inappropriate dosages, which negatively affected their behaviour and performance.

#### **e) Summary**

In summary, managers, teachers, residence counsellors, parents and students identified a number of elements of the student experience at demonstration schools that help students make progress in addressing their challenges:

- Highly skilled teaching staff who specialize in teaching the students with severe LD challenges;
- Passionate teachers who have the time to address and mitigate the challenges students with severe LDs face;
- The small student-teacher in-class ratio;
- Work of the residential counsellors;
- Consistency of the program;
- Communications between the school and the residence – they all speak the same language;
- Highly structured teaching and residential programme;
- Five days a week and 18 hours a day means that classroom learning is reinforced and integrated with the residential program;
- 200 minutes per day for reading;



- The active use of the Empower reading program; and
- Use of technology for reading—during the week and on weekends: this enables teachers to monitor progress because it flags issues.

**f) Transition back to local school boards**

Demonstration school managers, teachers and residential staff believe that getting their students to the level where they can successfully return to their regular school is their prime objective. In turn, this means that these students will be more able to be productive and engaged citizens.

A key component of this program is the transition from demonstration schools back to the regular school after one or two years.

*“I am excited for him to go back because now he won’t be singled out for being different. With his experience at Sagonaska, he has what he needs to be successful and he’s not scared to go back to his old school.” – Current Demonstration School Parent*

Staff believed that when students returned to a regular school, while they would still require an IEP and accommodations, they now had better tools to learn and could, importantly, advocate for themselves.

*“We’re getting kids to create a one page brochure so when they leave Sagonaska they can hand their new teacher this and it explains their issues and what their needs are. It’s in user friendly language.” – Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

In terms of how well students did when they returned to a regular school, this tended to be anecdotal. Former students who came to the consultation sessions reported that they were, by and large, successful in transitioning back to their regular schools.

Over 40 former students participated in the consultations. Virtually all of them reported success in their post-demonstration school experience, both socially and academically. Some of them reported that they had graduated from university. They reported greater success at their home school after attending the demonstration school. They indicated that they were able to integrate back into the school. Even when they had setbacks, they used the tools they learned at demonstration schools to work through challenges. When they encountered resistance, their self-confidence and ability to self-advocate enabled them to make progress with teachers and their co-workers.

Having said this, it was reported that there were no long term impact studies that followed former cohorts of students. Many stakeholders, including teachers and administrators, wished that these studies be undertaken.

One of the demonstration schools reported collecting some data as a follow up though. This data showed positive results over one year.

*“Last year, we gathered info on all students that returned to a regular school. 100% of students that returned received all their credits from their home school. They were successful in every credit. There are students that struggle but typically because the teacher doesn’t understand how to work with a student with a learning disability.” – Demonstration School Management*

A staff member believed, and others agreed, that: *“Students are successful... students run their own businesses and are confident, goal oriented, reading tax-paying citizens, happy, take compliments, read novels, plan to go to post-secondary, know they have a future.” - Demonstration School Residential Counsellor*

There were a number of key points that teachers and residential staff made regarding what led to a successful transition and this included:

- That students know how to self-advocate;
- That the agreed upon IEP is followed and delivered to home school teachers in a timely manner; and
- The classroom teachers accept and are trained in the use of assistive technology.



In some instances, former students and their parents reported that the above elements were not followed, making the transition more difficult.

*“We've seen kids start to struggle when a teacher doesn't let them use a device or support them using it.” – Demonstration School Teacher*

The issue of classroom teachers not being aware of the returning student's need for assistive technology was cited quite frequently as one of key barriers to a successful transition.

Teachers and residential counsellors also noted that students with severe LDs need to understand that, if there is not regular reading, their reading skills will slip.

*“One of the other things has to do with the knowledge that kids should be “fixed” after attending Sagonaska. Teachers don't understand LD doesn't go away. Lack of teacher understanding is a problem. But, if you don't understand a student with a processing speed issue or working memory issue, you're not going to be able to support that student effectively.” - Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

*“They can slip back if not reading every day. LD kids need to read double to maintain. If they don't, they can lose skills. For example, kids will lose a couple of reading levels if they don't read over the summer.” - Demonstration School Residence Counsellor*

#### **g) Consequences of Not Addressing Severe Learning Disabilities**

Throughout the consultation process, there were a number of comments made about the consequences for individuals and society at large in not addressing severe reading deficiencies affecting students.

There was tremendous fear among parents that their children would be pushed onto the streets – get involved in crime, start doing drugs, or eventually end up on welfare.

*“I actually didn't know I had dyslexia till grade 6, but I was an angry kid my whole life. My math skills were horrible, and I couldn't read till I came here. I had a police record and I had a lot of devious things like misdemeanor assault. I came here in grade 8 and 9. If it weren't for that, I would've been in jail by now.” – Former Demonstration School Student*

### **3. Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for Demonstration Schools' students with a severe learning disability and their families?**

#### **a) Overview**

There were a number of themes that came from the stakeholders' consultations and online survey about moving forward with respect to the programs and services that would provide a positive experience for students with severe LDs.

These themes are:

- Demonstration schools are a critical pathway;
- Specialized teaching focused on individual learning styles for students with severe LDs;
- Residential program is a key component in helping students with severe LDs;
- 18 hours/5 day immersion;
- Being with their peer group with similar challenges;
- Alternative teaching methods, programs or services (e.g., e-learning) should be considered;
- Assistive technology is key, but requires trained teachers and adequate IT support; and



- Every school board should seriously consider the use of Empower.

These themes are expanded upon in the appendix, reflecting comments coming from the online survey.

As outlined earlier, there were a number of consultation sessions with school boards across Ontario with respect to their programs and services for students with severe LDs.

## **b) School Board Programs and Services for students with LDs**

### **Overall Response**

All school boards report that students with learning disabilities make up the largest portion of students with an exceptionality. On average, boards report that this population of students make up over 40% of those with an exceptionality. The number of students with learning disabilities varied according to the size of the board. This numbered into the 1,000s for the largest boards and under 500 for the smaller boards. In terms of those with severe learning disabilities, this also varied with some well into the 100s. However, some boards reported being unable to say, as they did not differentiate between the severity of a student's LD. Some boards report having established tiers of LD severity, though.

Similarly, how boards work with students with learning disabilities varies. While all report the use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), the programs for teaching students with LDs ranged from withdrawal a few times a week for one hour, to separate congregated LD classes for half a day five days a week, to a segregated program for students with LDs.

As a number of boards report that they do not distinguish between the severities of the learning disabilities. Some felt such boards use a uniform approach to teaching students with a range of LDs, regardless of severity.

One of the challenges that many boards reported is the great distances encompassing their board which makes it more difficult to congregate students with severe LDs in a single class. However, other boards also reported that even where distance is not an issue, they did not have any kind of segregated classes for students with LDs. In fact, the majority of boards across the province do not appear to have congregated classes of any kind and rely on a withdrawal method for students with all types of LDs. Many of these boards reported challenges in working with their populations with severe LDs, except those relying on one of the demonstration schools.

Overall, there appeared to be broad recognition that more needs to be done for students with severe LDs. However, only a minority of boards appear to use placements beyond withdrawal for an hour a few times a week. A number of boards across the province have undertaken a number of initiatives that they believe are successful.

Where there were segregated classes, there were a number of options cited by boards:

- Busing students to specialized programs.
- Having LD resource programs where resource teachers support up to 15 – 20 students for half of the day, providing intensive support in language and math.
- Having a three tiered system. If the student is assessed as having a LD, he or she is offered a place at an ISA (Intensive Support and Assessment) Centre for a two-year placement where needs are addressed. Depending on the LD, the student then returns to the home school or to the regular class. A maximum of 12 students are taught at the ISA Centre. There is an annual review and assessment to review the student's progress.
- Most boards indicate that students with LDs are integrated but report varying levels of success in integrated classrooms.

A number of boards also reported moving away from congregated classes due to budget constraints. This was commented on in a consultation session with advocacy groups, but a further motive for the cuts was provided, focusing on inclusion rather than segregation as an approach that some believed was based on a philosophical approach to pedagogy.

*“From a Provincial prospective, we’re hearing more and more from school boards that they are cutting back on the smaller classes and hearing from parents that they are concerned about that. They were*



*hoping their child could continue or that they want their child to have that option. It seems more are moving away from it”.*

*“They say it costs more, though I’m not sure that’s actually the case. If they say they are going to supply the resource in the class it doesn’t make much difference. There is a belief that inclusion is better, some admin staff and boards hold that philosophy quite closely. When they come into a school board they use the budget as the reason, but it’s more the philosophy.”*

### **c) Identification and Assessment**

One of the issues that surfaced in terms of students with LDs is appropriate identification. A number of boards, including large boards, indicated that they have many more students with LDs than those that have been specifically identified. The reason for this is that many have been identified informally, but where there is a limited need for a formal assessment, while others are waiting for an assessment. As an example, one board indicated that they probably have 9,000 students with an LD, but only 4,500 had been formally identified.

Most boards indicated that they rely on the classroom teacher to bring the issue to the attention of the principal, the special education board, or the school team. This might then lead to a review of the student’s performance on school work, tests, or on the EQAO. From here, other approaches might be tried. Most boards also indicated the approach is not effective. They may conduct further assessments, but many indicated they do not have the resources for a lot of testing. In fact, a number of smaller boards indicated that they do not have staff psychologists and rely on non-board psychological consultants, which they report are expensive. Even with relatively well-resourced boards with staff psychologists, there are wait times reported. The reported wait times varied greatly across boards from two weeks (depending on the time of year) to up to three years for an assessment to take place.

Related to this was the frequent comment that teachers were not always aware of, or trained to assess, learning disabilities. This same comment was also applied to principals and, consequently, that learning disabilities often have less importance as an issue to be addressed by a school. Similarly, the same point was made about the leadership of school boards and the extent to which the superintendent was focused on learning disabilities as a priority issue.

There was also mention by some boards of informal assessment using Wechlar Individual Achievement Test (WYAT). Most boards also mentioned that rather than wait for formal assessment they begin approaches that meet a student’s specific learning needs.

Many school boards (especially the smaller or more rural boards) acknowledged that some students with limited reading skills were not identified until later grades. A number of boards also stressed that this is an issue for them -- one they intend to address.

Some school boards indicated that early identification is often more challenging where a student has either frequently changed boards or schools and the previous school may not have had time to identify the issue.

Further, some boards acknowledge that they set priorities for who gets assessed – a student with behaviour exceptionalism or on the autism spectrum before the quiet child with a suspected learning disability.

#### **i) Approach and Programs**

There are two basic approaches that boards report using with students with LDs. The most common is withdrawal for targeted instruction, and this could be an hour a day or less. The other approach, used less frequently, is a segregated half day of classes at one or two schools in the board. This latter approach only appears to be in place in larger boards in major urban centres.

The challenge of addressing severe learning disabilities appears to be compounded by the fact that a number of boards across the province report that they do not classify students by the severity of their learning disability and appear to have a common approach for all students with a LD. As noted above, this is typically a withdrawal approach.

A number of consultation participants made the point that the success of an intervention depends on the teacher and that teachers vary greatly in their ability to work with students with learning disabilities.



Some of the boards using the withdrawal approach also report using Empower as the method of reading instruction for an hour withdrawal per day and with small classes using this approach. In most instances, this overall approach appears to be only available at the primary level.

While a number of boards report using Empower, others report that they are looking into this program. Those that use Empower report that it is an excellent program: *“They get fantastic results.”* However, most school boards do not report its use. In fact, many boards report no real awareness of the program. Where there is some awareness, but no adoption, this is attributed to the costs and special training required as well the protocol for use, which one participant described as a *“restriction.”*

Another issue that came up in another session is that fitting Empower into the school timetable is challenging.

*“There is timing and it can’t be during literacy time, math time, gym time etc. It has to be an hour a day, its intervention you can’t just miss one day.” - Advocacy Group Participant*

Lexia is also used to some extent but, again, is not cited with any frequency.

There was more frequent use of Google Read & Write and many boards report that they are actively exploring its use.

## **ii) Role of Assistive Technology**

All boards report the use of assistive technology and that it’s rapidly increasing. Further, many report that technology, in general, is being more widely accepted and used in schools. There appears, however, to be considerable variation in the broader use of technology by boards across the province.

*“We’ve moved from assistive technology to just technology. Part of our school improvement planning has a technology portion to it ... We’ve almost all gone Apple. School teams have met...it came together nicely.” – School Board Staff*

There are three significant challenges mentioned across many boards:

- Apprehension by individual teachers;
- Number of teachers trained to use this technology; and
- The lack of technical support.

In the case of resistance by some teachers, this applied to both assistive technology and the use of laptops and other devices in the classroom by regular students.

*“We also use Google – there’s lots of grumbling from teachers, but the students just eat it up. It really does have a lot of programs that educators love.” – School Board Staff*

*“Some people are more comfortable with the technology... next year in grade 8 ... it will be all online... unfortunately it depends on the teacher.” – School Board Staff*

The other issues related to teachers was resourcing them in relation to the technology and ensuring that they had the appropriate related professional development.

*“Teacher training, teacher capacity in the classroom. Sometimes it’s hard to get it down to the level of the student in the classroom. We have an Ed Tech coach. It’s a regular teacher who has part of their day allotted to help with students. We’ve gone the same way as other boards, we’ve moved to the Google platform. Every student has a Google address and it helps in the classroom. It takes away the stigma.” – School Board Staff*

*“Teaching capacity in the past has been a barrier. A student can do well one year and then not as well the next. We have a team to make sure there is support there for the kids.” – School Board Staff*

Where participants’ boards used technology widely, they highlighted the advantages for students with LDs not being singled out as being different.



*"As more and more students bring their own devices to class now, students are seeing what is essential and what is good for all. The stigma is being lost. It is hard for students with LDs at the beginning to use the technology when other students are not." – School Board Staff*

Participants felt that where teachers were resistant due to limited knowledge of how to work the technology or with students with learning disabilities, this needed to be addressed.

One approach adopted by some boards was to have specific technical staff that go from school to school to train students and teachers.

A further challenge identified is staying abreast of assistive technology as boards believe the field is rapidly changing. From this perspective, a number of boards reported relying on the demonstration schools for knowledge sharing or training.

In terms of technical support, some boards openly acknowledged that this is an ongoing challenge. Having technical support staff to train the students and to repair equipment were cited as two of the larger challenges. In fact, on this point, a number of the student participants also cited this latter point as a problem.

*"(Students name) got his laptop quickly, but no one taught him how to use it... two years later it hadn't been used. It had been put down and not used." – Special Education Teachers accompanying students*

*"The lack of support staff... when I started teaching this program, I had support staff 6 years ago compared with this year... no support staff... each grade they are learning differently... each classroom its "miss, miss, miss, miss,"... there's only one of me." – Special Education Teachers accompanying students*

It is interesting that some of the smaller and more remote boards also appear to have embraced technology, especially for their students with LDs.

*"We've separated into different devices.. currently up to grade 3... we use an iPad, then chrome book (4-12)... speech to text, text to speech, a lot of uses of Google classroom... spec. ed. and the teacher etc... all have access, can change it to suit the child they're working with... student can use the features of the technology and can get immediate feedback... Apps and other things that are required... It's highly successful... We've hired two STEM coordinators... priority being on the students who require assistive tech... well oiled machine... they provide training to the student and the adult... online referral system... the STEM coordinators are part of it... who requires some training or support, the stem can go out and support them." – School Board Staff*

One of the other issues cited by some northern boards was bandwidth to support the technology.

*"We have a few challenges, one of which is bandwidth. In the more remote areas, especially... Tech is quickly changing... speech to text etc... people talking about siri, premiere... it's hard to keep up..." – School Board Staff*

### **iii) Evaluation/Assessment**

Annual reporting appeared to be the main source of determining how students with LDs were progressing. However, this did not speak to how students with LDs were being assessed to ensure the intervention was working.

If a student with an LD appeared to be struggling (and this appeared to be based on the report card), some boards reported that a better targeted intervention would be attempted which could involve bringing more specialists to the table. A number also indicated that they would reach out to the demonstration school for their input and an in-person review. In some cases, where new technology was introduced, there was an assessment after a few weeks to assess how it was going.

The other issue that all boards acknowledged was that they had no long term tracking to assess how their interventions and different approaches work with students with a severe, or even milder, form of LD.



#### **iv) Socio-Emotional Issues**

School boards' approaches to the socio-emotional issues that can accompany severe learning disabilities varied greatly. While all boards report that they have put more emphasis on mental health issues in recent years (many mentioned anti-bullying as one such initiative and this was helping overall), there appeared to be a good deal of variation in the attention paid to the mental health of students with LDs.

Most boards do not appear to have given this set of issues much attention. However, some have.

*"This year we have launched a self-advocacy program. We have coaches for students with learning disabilities." – School Board Staff*

Some report working with the local chapter of Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario and meeting with the students and parents to discuss a variety of issues, including self-esteem and self-advocacy.

For some boards, the issue seemed to be a focus on self-advocacy and encouraging students to better understand their situation and their needs. One board reported some success by reminding students that they do not have a learning disability unless they are of average or above average intelligence.

*"When you tell a student they don't qualify for a LD unless they have at least average intelligence, that changes the conversation." – School Board Staff*

*"We did the same thing, almost a one to one has really taken away that attitude... really helped with the stigma piece... Students knowing their strength and maybe things they need to improve on... we still have parents who don't want to tell their children... lots of conversations that still need to take place, children are still part of families, having certain characteristics doesn't mean you're stupid." – School Board Staff*

Another board reported developing a one page profile of each student that is given to teachers and that this seems to help. This appears to be similar to the brochures that demonstration school students transitioning to their home school give to teachers.

One of the issues confounding dealing with the learning disability (and cited in the above quote) is that parents, boards report, sometimes resist the LD identification and do not want their child defined as having a learning disability. This then makes it difficult to discuss LDs with the parents and/or a student and use an intervention.

Despite any parental resistance, there was a general sense of the need for access to early psychological screening tools, especially for students with a LD. There was also a suggestion for a universal best practice screening tool in terms of identifying warning signs early enough for students who will need assistance/counselling to work through socio-emotional issues.

As noted above, though, in terms of working with a student with a learning disability's socio-emotional issues, most participants indicated that their programs were directed at all students and there was nothing specific for students with a LD.

One of the other suggestions made by a number of participants was that if more effort was made to identify LDs early enough, and the appropriate intervention strategies put in place, then some of the socio-emotional issues may be minimized.

#### **d) How Demonstration Schools Can Help School Boards**

Many school boards report frequently interacting with the demonstration schools. They mentioned the workshops offered by these schools and consultations to assist with addressing issues affecting a specific student with LD. Many of the boards report that they rely on demonstration schools for support as they do not have resources to address many of the issues students with severe LD face. It was the smaller school boards that underscored these points. Even larger school boards reported having some contact with the demonstration schools and sending the occasional student to one of the schools.





The value of teachers returning from a secondment at a demonstration school and the importance of the knowledge and experience they bring back to the boards was cited with some frequency. Some also made reference to the knowledge that some students returning from a demonstration school have about assistive technology that can also be shared.

While these points were made by the majority of boards consulted, it was the smaller boards who tended to report the greatest extent of use. Further, a number of northern boards expressed a desire for a demonstration school to be located in the north for easier access to the schools resources and services.

Overall, school board staff spoke to three areas where demonstration schools could support school boards:

1. Transfer knowledge and expertise through workshops and other types of programming;
2. Boost school board expertise by capitalizing on returning teachers' experiences from secondments at demonstration schools; and
3. Demonstration schools need to continue to admit students with severe LDs who have not responded to, or made progress as a result of school boards' approaches.

Finally, in terms of the question of the need for the demonstration schools the responses below sum up a more general feeling:

*"Do all school boards in the province have the capacity to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities? If the answer is no, they can't, then there is definitely yes, they are needed. School boards can come forward and say yes we are doing it, but unless there is proof you are doing it at every level there is still the need." - Advocacy Group Participants*

*Related to this was the issue of capacity building and if more capacity was to be built in the boards, the view expressed in a number of consultations was that this has to come from the leadership level of a board.*

*"If you are going to build teaching capacity, then you need to have a supportive administration; principals, the superintendent. If they aren't open then it won't work." - Advocacy Group Participant*



## IV. Robarts School for the Deaf



## Robarts School for the Deaf

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### 1. What knowledge and skills do Robarts students need to have when they leave school?

#### a) Feedback from Consultations at the Robarts School for the Deaf

Stakeholders consulted for the Robarts School for the Deaf identified the following skills and knowledge.

##### ***Robarts' Students should have the Same Skills and Knowledge of Other Ontario Students***

The underlying premise that was expressed by stakeholders was the desire and wish for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to have the same opportunities to acquire the skills and knowledge as other Ontario students.

##### ***Development of Bilingual Language Capabilities***

Many parents and former students expressed strong feelings about the need to learn ASL as their primary language while learning written and possibly oral English. In the view of many stakeholders, this bilingualism really positions students who are Deaf or hard of hearing most strongly for doing post-secondary studies and the working world. They reported that the provincial schools are an important element in the building of Deaf identity.

##### ***Developing a Deaf Cultural Identity and Ability to Participate in Deaf Culture***

This was viewed as important by a number of stakeholders, particularly parents and former and current students of Robarts. There is a sense of belonging and community and that the school creates a sense of comfort and builds confidence and self-esteem. Forging a common identity enables students to understand who they are and what their full potential can be regardless of their hearing capabilities. As with a bilingual language capability, the provincial schools are seen as an important element in the creation of deaf culture.

##### ***Development of Self-Esteem, Confidence, Ability to Self-Advocate and Leadership Skills***

In the same vein, building the self-esteem, self-confidence, abilities to advocate for themselves, and leadership skills of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing was viewed as critical to their futures. These were closely linked with their language proficiencies and their Deaf identities.

##### ***Development of Life and Work Skills***

Developing the life and work skills of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing was also cited as important. The development of work skills was highlighted many times. One former student made the point that developing work skills will help individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing to find jobs and thus become less reliant on ODSP.

In short, participants emphasized that working with Robarts students to assist them in becoming productive and self-sustaining adults is an important area of focus.

##### ***Opportunities for Physical and Social Activity***

These skills and knowledge were frequently identified by stakeholders. This emphasis came from stakeholders who are Deaf or hard of hearing who felt excluded from sports in regular schools. Social skills are closely linked to language proficiency and Deaf culture.

##### ***Able to Become Critical Thinkers***

To be successful in the future, some stakeholders stated that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to be critical thinkers – ask the right questions and to be able to think through problems.

#### b) Experience Prior to Attending Robarts School

Parents of current and former students expressed a high degree of frustration with their experiences prior to coming to Robarts School.

*“School boards are not adequately prepared or resourced to handle Deaf students.” – Advocate who is Deaf or hard of hearing*



It was widely noted by Robarts managers and staff that students who come to Robarts, either following a period of time at a regular school or as their first school, are typically well behind hearing students' grade level. They attributed this to the fact that most deaf students have hearing parents and have not had the same language exposure as other students prior to coming to Robarts School. In fact, they report that many students coming to the school have no or limited language skills.

These stakeholders reported a number of issues for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing in attending a regular school:

- Teachers were not sufficiently trained to teach to students who are Deaf or hard of hearing;
- Without proper support, students who are Deaf or hard of hearing easily misunderstand what is being taught;
- Lack of academic achievement and success;
- That the technology for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing does not always ensure hearing well enough to comprehend;
- Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing become isolated and socially disconnected from other students;
- Some students reported that they were bullied and/or harassed by other students;
- Some students mentioned that they were excluded from sports;
- During extracurricular activities, there was never an accommodation for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing;
- The interpreters are not properly trained ASL translators;
- If an interpreter is sick, that day is lost for the student who is Deaf or hard of hearing; and
- An interpreter is not a teacher and the meaning can be lost or difficult to explain as the student is indirectly participating in the lesson.

Several stakeholders noted that some students who have cochlear implants encounter problems in schools and have not acquired the basic language skills that other children acquire prior to coming to the school for the first time. This means that they perform well below grade expectations due to the lack of development of cognition skills which comes from language proficiency.

The following are quotes from parents and students about their experiences prior to coming to Robarts:

*"I'm a Deaf student. When I went to a hearing school, the teacher would talk and the students would listen in real time. There is a rhythm of real time in the classroom. By the time the interpreter translates the content to me (sometimes poorly), the class has moved on to a different topic when I am putting my hand up to say something. Here at Robarts, I'm involved in the real time of the class – I can partake in the conversation and learning. That is the difference."*

*"In my old school, I had no idea what was going on in the class. I had an interpreter and they took me through it. But, I failed and it was very frustrating. When I came here, I had success."*

*"I like to talk about mainstream school issues. I wanted to be involved in sports, but I was not allowed. I kept trying out and they kept saying no. Basically, I wasn't allowed because I was Deaf."*

*"At the mainstream school, my best friend was the interpreter. I really had no other friends"*  
– Former and Current Robarts Students

*"It was a humiliating experience. We knew our son would have to be in a school like this. When we found out about Robarts, we knew we had to get him in here. But, we had to put him in a public school for a certain amount of time, just to get someone to come in and evaluate him, for them to tell us they wouldn't be able to give him what he needed." – Current Robarts Parent*



One of the other issues that parents and others consulted raised is that many of the students coming to the Robarts School have multiple exceptionalities and this makes it very difficult for regular schools to manage. The following quote illustrates this point:

*“I’m going to make a confession. When my son was first born, he was a different child. At the age of one, he received his first set of hearing aids.... and I was not too worried about him being Deaf because I knew my cousin was Deaf as well. She went through a mainstream school and she did very well. So, my hope was he could do that as well. When we found out that he also had autism that was what scared me. The Deaf interpreter is not going to sit with Michael and teach him to sign. He needs a teacher to teach him that. If you close a school for the Deaf, you will have children in a room where the school board thinks that the best thing to do is have an interpreter in the classroom. That child now needs to be removed and taught sign language, and then they are separate and learning ASL alone. Then, they have to learn the language as well. We are amazed at what our son had learned. He went from 15 words to 150 words, and that was amazing for even a Deaf child. But, for an autistic child, it is even more amazing. I have seen this school work.” – Parent of a Former Robarts School Student*

### c) First Language Acquisition

In the consultation sessions with a wide variety of stakeholders, including parents with students at Robarts, the debate around how to best provide language skills to children whose parents have opted for a cochlear implant was highlighted frequently. A variety of views were shared regarding the Infant Hearing Program (IHP) and the advice given to parents. Further, there were also comments about advice following the initial medical diagnosis of deafness.

A number of those consulted expressed that parents, until recently, had not been given impartial advice regarding the chances for full hearing and the development of speech following an implant. Many Robarts parents felt that they were led to believe (and some had also experienced) that implants would mean their child would be “normal”. By this, they meant able to hear and speak. These parents also report that ASL was not offered as an option.

*“The first person that parents who have Deaf children meet tells them about the implants. They are told their children can be just like you. And 90% of those families do not know that these schools exist. I looked at oral options, I looked at Deaf options. I was fortunate enough to meet great Deaf people and I put myself and my kid in an environment where they would see that.”*

*“We were talking to the doctors about the implants. The doctors say ‘ohh we can fix them’. That is not their job. It is not the doctor’s job. They need to be sent to the right people, Deaf people, and Deaf adults. The hearing parents need to be given the options.”*

– Parents of Robarts School Students

Some other stakeholders consulted also noted that hearing parents are not being thoroughly briefed on their options when they first learn that their child is Deaf or hard of hearing. Many of these parents are presented with only one option without being advised of others – both oral and ASL. One stakeholder claimed 95% of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are not using ASL, while about one-third of students in British Columbia use ASL.

All stakeholders making this point agreed that some children can be successful with cochlear implants and perform well in regular schools. But, they also argued that other children are not successful due to cochlear implants. As noted above, if they are not successful, their cognitive and language development can lag significantly and pose long-term problems for their education.

One stakeholder noted that some students who are Deaf or hard of hearing attend short-term programs at a Provincial School for the Deaf. After attending one of these short-term programs, a number of them wish to enroll full-time (even though it was not the wish of their parents) because they experience a higher quality program better suited to their needs.

A recurring issue throughout the consultations was the declining number of students at the schools for the Deaf and the apparent declining need for ASL in regular schools.

There were a variety of proposed explanations for this:



- That parents have been misinformed about the options and have been presented with an overly optimistic view of the success of cochlear implants;
- That the success of cochlear implants, and regular schools ability to provide services for this population of students, has reduced the demand for ASL and Deaf schools; and
- That parents are simply not being informed about the school.

The other issue that came up in some consultation sessions was the debate over integrated or congregated classes for students who are Deaf. Those favouring integration into the mainstream also tended to believe that cochlear implants had made integration a desirable and achievable option. Those favouring separate congregated classes tended to focus on the failures of cochlear implants and that when they did not work, if a child did not acquire ASL, they would have no language. A number of those consulted also challenged the view that learning ASL interfered with oral language development and argued that the research did not support this view.

On this point, a number of those consulted also suggested that if a child did not acquire language of any kind by a certain age, this led to the likelihood of significant cognitive impairment that made future learning challenging. The issue raised by those expressing this view was that it was important to present ASL as an option because, if the implant failed and the child or student was unable to acquire language acquisition through speech, ASL would at least ensure that there was language acquisition and subsequent “normal” cognitive development.

Recent changes to the IHP were also raised and that now IHP consultants were speaking to ASL as an option. As a result, a member of an advocacy group reported that: *“Back in 2014, there were 3 – 5 parents who requested ASL for their child. Now there is over 100”.*

This same individual believed that this change would increase the demand for education in ASL and that the schools for the Deaf may well see increases in their enrollment over the next few years.

## 2. What are the best ways to prepare Robarts students to enter the workforce, post secondary education or other pathways and become productive and actively engaged citizens?

### a) Overview

There were a number of themes that emerged from the consultations and the online survey.

#### ***j) Robarts was viewed as a key pathway to being a productive and engaged citizen.***

Many of the stakeholders, particularly parents and current/former students, express strong levels of support for the Robarts School as a key pathway for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to become productive and actively engaged citizens.

There was one elementary school student who really summarized the beliefs of the parents, students, and many other stakeholders. He vigorously and poignantly expressed (in ASL and then interpreted) the importance of Robarts to Deaf people like himself:

*“There are a lot of students who need this place to stay open. If we go mainstream, what is going to happen to us? I can't go to a school with hearing children, hearing teachers, hearing principals. I can't do that—I can't go a mainstream school. We need our language as Deaf people. We can't talk and hear anything. We are going to miss so much. We need our own teachers. We don't need A TEACHER. We need a Deaf teacher who can sign and communicate with us. We need a place where we can learn. We are going to miss out and lose so much. It's better that we're here. We're all speaking the same language. I'm sure in a mainstream school, I will fail. In this school, it's more comfortable, Deaf to Deaf. Thinking of a hearing teacher, there is not going to be the kind of interaction we need. We need this school so we can talk to the principal and teachers. My family has the ability to sign. That's why we need that so much. We have interpreters here too if we need to talk to a hearing person. Everything is*



*in place here. In a hearing environment, I feel like I'm going to fail and I really fear the future."* –  
Current Robarts Student

Many stakeholders believe that Robarts School provides a motivating and supportive learning environment that enables students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to achieve their potential. It is believed that Robarts is able to provide specialized teachers and programming targeted at the needs and requirements of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

**ii) *Robarts students need to be fluent in their first language (ASL) and develop a bilingual literacy capacity.***

*"Bilingual literacy is key."* – Online Survey Participant

Many of the stakeholders underscored the importance for Robarts students to acquire ASL and then develop an understanding for English (both comprehension and writing). This was viewed as key to the future success of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. There are also strong views that Robarts should be providing a bilingual education (ASL and oral English) to help those students who have the potential to become bilingual (ASL and English literacy and oral).

**iii) *Being exposed to the Deaf community, culture, and role models is essential.***

Many parents and students (both former and current) express the need for Deaf culture and community. This view was mirrored in the perspectives of other stakeholders.

As noted elsewhere in this report, the development of the Deaf culture and access to it is viewed as important to help build self-confidence and self-esteem.

**iv) *Early childhood acquisition of language skills is critical to long-term success.***

The point was widely acknowledged that early childhood acquisition of language skills is critical. It was mentioned a number of times that this acquisition starts well before children start formal schooling. Some participants noted that this language acquisition has paramount importance to cognitive development which has long-term implications for success in school and eventually a person's ability to be a productive and engaged citizen.

**v) *Teaching ASL to families with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing is viewed as highly important.***

The need to provide language support to families with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing was frequently cited by participants engaged in the consultation process. It was suggested that the Deaf schools should be providing cost-effective programming to enable families to acquire ASL which facilitates the growth and development of the Deaf student.

**vi) *All students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to have a smooth transition to the hearing world.***

Another theme emerging from the consultations was the need for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to be provided with more support and training in transitioning to the hearing world as they enter their adult lives.

It was suggested that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing should be provided with training, tools, and co-op programs to help them make this transition.

**b) Elements that Make the Robarts School Effective**

Different groups identified a number of factors contributing to the success of the Robarts School:

1. A peer group with similar challenges;
2. A vibrant social environment;
3. Dedicated and specialized teachers who are completely focused on Deaf and hard of hearing students;
4. Small class size;
5. Ability to participate in Deaf culture;
6. The primary language of instruction is ASL;



7. Supportive and motivating environment;
8. There is no need for specialized staff to interpret teachers' communications;
9. Additional support for other disabilities;
10. Targeted technology aimed at meeting the needs of Deaf or hard of hearing students;
11. Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are able to access specialized programming from hearing schools; and
12. Opportunities to participate in sports and extracurricular activities – there is no bias against students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. There is support for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing during after school events and activities.

There were some concerns expressed about Robarts' low enrollment and that there has been a corresponding problem with fewer programs and services being offered by the school.

Having said this, stakeholders expressed a high level of support for Robarts:

*"This is a place where the Deaf community can come for recitals, where culture is transmitted...I've seen Deaf theatre productions here where the whole community gathers here for an appreciation of the arts." – Robarts Office Staff Member*

*"There are many students who will learn everything they need for driving and communication here and we're losing that by losing these places. [I studied here] and I'm successful and independent, but the young people won't have the necessary skills because of all the cuts to all these programs." – Robarts Teacher*

*"At this school, we've gained an achievement of excellence from the Ministry. Other schools don't have the resources that we have, and we are able to help our students build the skills to live normal lives. Teachers interact with Deaf students at a personal level and ensure equity for ASL and English...We have a Deaf Principal, Managers, Teachers, and in other schools you would not have these types of people in the school community and students are isolated. Many parents are angry that this school is at risk of closing. It's providing a vast amount of community support." – Robarts Teacher*

### **3. Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive school experience for Robarts students and their families?**

#### **a) Overview**

A number of different themes emerged from the face-to-face consultations and the online survey regarding programs and services:

- Robarts School should continue to be open;
- Educational curriculum needs to be bilingual;
- Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to be educated in, and socialize in, ASL;
- More ASL classes for parents and communities;
- Early acquisition of sign language is crucial for long-term development;
- Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need a sense of community/Deaf schools are centres for the Deaf community;
- Continue home school visitation program;
- Parents of children who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to be educated on what they should expect from the school system;





- Provide resources to help students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to move into the working world; and
- Provincial Deaf Schools should offer short-term placements/ weekend workshops (i.e. retreats) for all students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

## **b) Program Services provided by School Boards**

### ***i) Overall Response***

Overall, board staff report fewer challenges for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing than they do for those with learning disabilities. At the same time, they also report that the population they serve with this exceptionality is also far smaller and, subsequently, requires less overall resourcing.

In most cases, board participants noted that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing were integrated into regular classes (with some support, if required) and withdrew, also if required. Further, in most boards there is little or no provision for ASL. Participants representing school boards report that this is typically a result of few parents requesting this service. In larger boards there appears to be some ASL, and one board reports segregated classes taught in ASL.

The extent of the use of assistive technology varies somewhat, but soundfields appear to be fairly widely used, and to a lesser extent FM systems. Some teacher resistance was noted and this could make learning for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing more challenging.

There was a mixed response about the performance of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Some consultation participants believe that students are managing reasonably well and that they can keep up. Others are much less certain. Many believe that the problem often stems from inadequate language acquisition at an early age.

One issue that occasionally came up was the social-emotional well-being of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing – most significantly, the social isolation of students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Some believed that other students are sometimes less willing to accept those who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

### ***ii) Language Acquisition***

One of the key concerns for boards is the extent to which students starting a school have acquired language basics. Some boards report using provincial schools' home visiting program to assess a child's needs before s/he starts school.

Board participants report that the issue of language acquisition is compounded by parents "grieving", and in some instances, their inability to support their child's language acquisition. A few participants note that a key is building a good bond with parents and working with them to help support the board's work with students' speech development. They also feel that parents have a responsibility in this regard.

In many instances, when a student is struggling to speak, participants noted that the board will recommend the learning of ASL. However, parents may be resistant. This stems from parents' limited knowledge of ASL and reluctance to admit that their child is Deaf. In addition, schools report that they need parental approval in order to teach a new language. These factors limit the use of ASL in the schools.

Some boards indicated seeing more of a shift to an interest in having children learn ASL as a main or backup language.

### ***iii) Basic Approach***

In most instances across boards, students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are integrated into regular classrooms. In most cases, students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are oral and many boards do not report any ASL students. Other boards report one or two students. These students are, again, integrated into regular classes but with an interpreter. There appears to be some use of itinerant teachers, but one or two at most per board.

Almost all boards report that they do not have the numbers for ASL-taught classes, with only one or two boards reporting segregated classes that are taught in ASL. These classes are typically within a mainstream school.

*"For us, the issue is the critical mass; they have teachers who are Deaf and in a signing program they can all sign, but they have very few ASL users, maybe 20." – School Board Staff*



Despite a bigger focus on oral/aural teaching/learning, boards report that they share the responsibility (along with parents) in teaching students ASL if that is the students' (or parents') primary language. However, most boards report that they are unable to easily provide appropriate ASL language instruction if there were the demand. Even in boards where there are one or two ASL students, they appear to be unsure of the quality or thoroughness of the instruction to students.

*"We have signed support. Often, if we introduce a new concept, we will introduce it using an ASL structure and incorporate the spoken language into that. Total communication. We do whatever we have to do to make sure the students understand what is being taught." – School Board Staff*

Another challenge identified by boards is the lack of trained interpreters. The basic issue appears to be salary. One board notes that they had tried extensively to hire an interpreter, but were repeatedly turned down because of the low salary offered.

A few participants made the point that those making funding decisions do not have the knowledge or understanding of the implications for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing and the positive impact that specialized teachers have on this population of students.

Most boards report that support is available for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, although this appears to vary greatly across boards. An example of an effective support was provided by one of the students consulted. This student reports having a note taker who types the teacher's words for her to view.

*"It works amazingly well. In elementary, I didn't have a note taker. In high school when I had it, I didn't realize how much I missed. Even if there is an FM on the teacher, I still miss stuff. If there is a conversation the teacher is having with another student, it aids with the notes." –Hard of hearing student*

Several board participants note that while students who are Deaf or hard of hearing (with implants) are integrated into regular classes, they have strategies to help students who appear to be struggling.

*"We try and see how much support they can get from that school. If a student is struggling, they look at how the school can support them. Then, if that doesn't help, they go to self-contained classes. Tiers are used to see what step to take, depending on their stage." - School Board Staff*

*"It depends on the child's need. If you have a child with a large gap, you might do more. You try to keep them mainstream as much as possible. You fill in the gaps by reviewing a lesson to make sure they comprehend it. I may have a student I take out two hours a week, and one I might take out a short time after a lesson." - School Board Staff*

A student also gave some sense of the types of informal supports available:

*"My math teacher comes to mind, modifies questions so I can comprehend and being able to have that one-on-one time helps. I spent time ... in the Deaf program where we're all signing, and also spent time in the hearing classrooms as well with my hearing schoolmates, and I like both. I like both environments, socially." – Deaf student*

On a required basis, boards also report bringing in specialists (audiologists, language pathologists, speech therapists, psychologists) as part of the school team where a classroom teacher sees a student not progressing. In some instances, these specialists are board staff members, while for others, they are external consultants.

One of the challenges noted by a special education teacher was that many teachers do not understand that many students who are Deaf or hard of hearing cannot hear certain sounds even with their hearing aid. Related to this, a number of participants, including students, reported that noisy classrooms were a particular challenge because of the interference or distraction it causes.



In fact, some participants noted that it was important to check in with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing after a class to ensure that they “got” the main point of the lesson. In many instances, participants noted if students were not good self-advocates (many they say were not), they struggled because of incomplete hearing or understanding.

#### **iv) Assistive Technology**

All boards report the use of assistive technology for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Not all, but many, boards report that schools have soundfields. A number of boards noted that when they are able to purchase the most appropriate technology for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing, there are “drastic” improvements in the learning environment for this population of students.

The use of FM systems was also cited and some believe that this, in fact, is a superior technology and provides clearer sound.

Participants also note, however, that there are challenges, irrespective of the amplification technology used and that extraneous noise is a problem.

*“The use of hearing aids, though, does not mean that the students can hear. They only work at 3 to 6 feet. One of the challenges is that not all students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are seated in the appropriate spot in the classroom. Hearing aids have limitations that have an impact on students’ learning capabilities.” – School Board Staff*

A number of participants noted that this technology only really work in quiet environments.

The other challenge cited by boards was teachers’ level of comfort or acceptance of the technology. In their view, this was an important ingredient for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing and their ability to learn.

*“We have teachers in our board leery of technology and, while it is mandatory for teachers to wear the pendant, some did not always wear it.” – School Board Staff*

*“We have that challenge as well. Either teachers love wearing the FM system or they hate it. They are more inclined if it’s attached with the room amplification, rather than one-on-one with the child.” – School Board Staff*

A number of participants made the point that more teachers need to be taught how to provide support. Some said that the issue was a lack of support and understanding at the senior ranks of administration at the board.

*“As qualified teachers of the Deaf, we need to educate from the top. I consult and realize how little people in school boards know or want to know about students with hearing loss. They think that providing FM systems will resolve the issues.” – Deaf or hard of hearing teacher*

The other technology cited by a few boards was interactive white boards. They work because students who are Deaf or hard of hearing benefit from visual learning approaches.

#### **v) Evaluation**

Assessing how well students who are Deaf or hard of hearing were learning appeared to be problematic for many boards.

Several boards report that they find it challenging to understand just how much students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are taking in and learning on a day-to-day basis. In addition, some note that their boards have both self-contained and/or integrated classrooms, but they have not been particularly successful with either approach.

One participant observed that nothing they are doing comes close to the learning environment offered by Robarts.

*“With my program at the elementary level, the majority of students have at least a two year delay... our goal is to keep that gap from getting larger... at reaching high school they are always behind.” – School Board Staff*



In most instances, there is a reliance on teachers to identify those students who were struggling.

**vi) Social Emotional Issues**

One of the more frequent comments about students who are Deaf or hard of hearing is that they often have multiple exceptionalities. These multiple exceptionalities compound the challenges around hearing loss.

Parents and student participants report that the general student body often has limited understanding of the Deaf or hard of hearing community. An exception is where a participant noted that in one school, many of the hearing students learned sign language because of a Deaf student.

School board participants believe many students who are Deaf or hard of hearing feel isolated. They also note that this depends on the nature and severity of the hearing loss.

*“Those students with low/moderate hearing loss can socialize with other students. Those with high hearing loss are currently isolated. They would do better with a more dedicated learning environment.” - School Board Staff*

*“They feel embarrassed by wearing a hearing aid. They don’t want to wear it. It requires teachers to teach other students about hearing aids in order to normalize the situation.” – School Board Staff*

Some participants commented that they believed negative feelings between the student population and students who are Deaf or hard of hearing start to occur in grades 6 and 7. In fact, a number of participants commented that at this age students often refuse to wear their hearing aids.

*“Yes - we have a team day - a picnic where those questions come up all the time - where is the peer support for these students? They need to accept the facts. We put a lot of work into the early years - you can't always support throughout but we want to encourage them to keep their hearing aids in.”  
– School Board Staff*

As noted, as students mature, some report that there is social stigma around assistive technology for the Deaf or hard of hearing, particularly hearing aids.

*“There is a social stigma as they get older. By grade 9, they abandon their hearing aids. They think they are coping - they are bluffing. They fake it and try to make their way through it. It's a similar pattern. By grade 12, they want help and want to come back to it. Some don't identify as being Deaf. Sometimes parents don't want to see their child as Deaf. A lot of parents shy away from it. They don't like the language in the definition.” – School Board Staff*

**vii) Community Organizations**

Relationships with community organizations varied greatly and depended on the presence of these organizations in the community. In some cases, boards report that there are programs put on by community organizations for families and also some financial assistance, if required.

Programs can include support for children before they enter school, including work with speech language pathologists. The Canadian Hearing Society was cited as helping with equipment and VOICE for help with oral/aural hearing impaired students.

**viii) Relationship with Provincial Schools**

Most boards report having had some contact with provincial schools over the years, either for consultations and advice or to accept their students. In addition, some report home visits from resource services which they believe were very helpful.

Consultations with the provincial schools for specific students and their needs were also cited on occasion as being of value.



*“Having someone on the other end who can visit and help and support... it’s just so valuable... We have a student who is Deaf and blind... How do we teach reading?” - School Board Staff*

*“I have used provincial schools several times. Even consulting with a psychologist to make sure they are a good fit for provincial school. They help me transition students into the provincial schools. If we were to get an interpreter to support the child, he would feel isolated because there is not a Deaf culture in our community.” - School Board Staff*

In the case of accepting students from the boards, this was often where parents wanted a student instructed in an ASL environment, or where the student was struggling and the parents opted for a provincial school *“as a last resort”*.

*“We have a couple of students for whom the implants aren’t successful and those were families who sent the child to the Provincial schools to work with ASL.” – School Board Staff*

*“We haven’t had any students there in a long time. We have one right now, but I think it was more at home, the mother wasn’t able to take care of the child and I think that worked best for her.” – School Board Staff*

*“We have a student... One of the provincial schools... My understanding that she was slipping further and further behind and the family was growing concerned about our resources.” – School Board Staff*

Some of the larger, well-resourced boards also report sending students to one of the provincial schools on occasion.

At the same time, boards also made the point that they simply did not have the resources to support some students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

*“The kinds of supports they offer in terms of interpreters and ASL assistants who are well versed, we don’t have that. Certainly, we would have to hire people. We don’t have anyone at this point.” – School Board Staff*

Further, some report feeling concerned for students who transition back from the Provincial Schools for the Deaf because they will not have the same sense of community at their home school.

*“If she were to return to our board in grade 10, there would be no peers to help her along the way. If her peer group returned with her and supported her, she would succeed. Now, there is no sense of community -- her sense of community is at that school with people who speak her language. I would worry about children who transition back into regular school. We would have to find qualified staff -- but I worry about children going back to regular schools.” – School Board Staff*

Finally, a number of the more remote and northern boards made the point that geography was a significant barrier for parents in sending their children to one of the Provincial schools, and that most parents had turned the idea down because of the distance involved when provided the option.



## Appendix – Feedback from the Ministry of Education Online Consultations



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### A Introduction

In addition to the face to face consultations, the Ministry of Education invited all stakeholders – parents, educators, students, and community partners – to respond to an online survey that contained three questions:

1. What knowledge and skills do English Demonstration School/Robarts’ students need to have when they leave school?
2. What are the best ways to prepare English Demonstration School/Robarts’ students to enter the workforce, post secondary education or other pathways, and become productive and actively engaged citizens?
3. Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive experience for English Demonstration School/Robarts students and their families?

### B Number of Responses

The online consultation survey was open for people to provide their responses to the questions from February 19<sup>th</sup> to April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

In total, there were 717 completed surveys with 507 responses for the English demonstration schools and 210 for Robarts School for the Deaf.

	English Demonstration Schools	Robarts School for the Deaf	Total
Current Student	25	1	26
Former Student	23	22	45
Parent of Current Student	62	9	71
Parent of Former Teacher	64	11	75
Teacher/Staff member	75	23	98
Other	258	144	402
<b>Total</b>	<b>507</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>717</b>

Many of the ‘other’ included the following types of individuals: parents of potential students, school board staff, superintendents, special education teachers from across Ontario, students who have applied to be admitted to one of the schools, members of advocacy groups, retired or former teachers from one of the schools, grandparents of students, community members, psychologists, and Deaf or hard of hearing community members.



## C Demonstration Schools

*“All students should leave school reaching their developmentally/age-appropriate potential – intellectually, socially and physically. They should have a clear understanding of their strengths and needs and an excellent transition plan to further education or other life goals. They should be mentally healthy, with good self-perception and engaged in positive activities.”*

### 1. What knowledge and skills do English Demonstration School students need to have when they leave school?

There are twelve themes that emerged from the stakeholders’ responses to this question with respect to the knowledge and skills that students should have when they graduate from the demonstration school and return to their home school.

It is clear from the input gathered from the survey that the students arriving at the demonstration schools have significant knowledge and skills deficits in a wide range of areas. Survey participants believe that these deficits will prevent these students with severe LD from becoming successful in high school and in their adult lives. Many of the comments indicate that they see the student experience at these schools as life changing.

#### a) Ability to Read

Throughout the responses, online participants believe that the students attending demonstration schools need to leave with the ability to read in order to be prepared to successfully complete high school and become a self-sustaining adult in society. Many noted that these students have reading levels from SK level to grade 3 even though they are in much higher grade levels. This gap was viewed as a concern as the students coming into the demonstration schools have very low reading and comprehension skills:

*“Every child leaving these schools needs to be able to read and write at an appropriate level to be able to take part in society, work in a job, and be a functioning productive member of this country.”*

*“Increase reading level to grade level.”*

*“Ability to read is a crucial skill that we use daily to gain knowledge, understand information, and communicate ideas. In today's society...this key life skill opens the door to progress, power, privilege, and opportunity across a lifetime. Therefore, the most important skill that Demonstration School students need to have when they leave school is the ability to read.”*

*“To be able to read and write and receive an education that will allow them to earn a living and be successful in life.”*

*“Reading: the Provincial schools provide a unique school and residence environment that supports students in acquiring the skills required to learn how to read. Virtually all students leave the school many grades higher than they did upon entering the school.”*

#### b) Key Academic Skills and Knowledge

Closely associated with reading abilities, participants who provided their input into the consultation clearly expected that these students will be able to operate at a level comparable to their peers in regular schools in all key subject areas. This is important to survey respondents because many of the students at the demonstration schools are below their peer group in terms of these core academic subjects:

*“All learning disabled individuals that I met at the Amethyst School had fallen behind in either one or more subject matters by many grade levels. This requires an intensive school program that enables the individual to gain knowledge in one or two years that is taught to students in the normal school curriculum over many years....This ultimately enabled me to go on to university.”*





*"The students need to be functioning at their current grade level."*

*"When students leave school they must have the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful at post-secondary, in a work environment and to be proper functioning members of society. To start, it is important that they have adequate academic skills to be successful in life. This includes reading and writing skills, problem solving skills as well as the specific skills needed to begin preparing for a career they desire."*

*"They need to know how to write and prepare essays using the different tools available to them. Math is also important. They need a solid foundation. They need to learn about science, geography, history, science. If you do not have the foundational subjects (as old fashion as it sounds) Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, you can't move forward in anything else with ease."*

*"All students need to have the functional academic skills required to read and do basic mathematics."*

*"The same knowledge and skills as other Ontario students."*

*"Develop academic skill sets including task completion, homework completion, classroom behaviour, teacher student relationship skills."*

#### **c) Critical Thinking/Problem Solving Skills**

Another important area that was identified by survey respondents was the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills.

*"Students need thinking skills (such as the Thinking Matrix) and inquiry skill that would lend to better problem solving skills."*

*"Executive functioning and problem solving."*

*"Visual spatial problem-solving."*

*"Perceptual reasoning."*

#### **d) Increased Confidence and Self-Esteem**

An essential skill cited by participants is the development of self-confidence and self-esteem. Students arriving at the demonstration schools have profound confidence and self-esteem issues. These issues have resulted from social isolation and lack of success at school.

*"Self-confidence. Self-confidence is the basic necessity to be successful.... Having success in some areas of life provides a person somewhere to draw strength and self-worth. Amethyst School helped me find self-confidence and gave me the basic building blocks to my future success."*

*"A chance to succeed. You can't be taught self-esteem. They need to experience success. That's what we do at the Provincial Demonstration schools for Learning Disabilities. Students with learning disabilities are identified as having low self-esteem. Our programs focus on building the self-esteem."*

*"The number one thing Learning Disabled children need to have when they leave school, and to function in the workforce, is self-confidence and self-esteem. They need to believe that they can accomplish anything that anyone else can and they need to have had opportunities provided to them in order to change the belief that has been in their heads for so many years. In the Demonstration schools, we believe that every child is equal and "I can't" isn't in our vocabulary. We constantly say "You Can" and that we believe in them. We provide them with opportunities to try new things and develop skills"*



*they never knew were possible. This change in mindset is something the students carry with them forever in school and in life.”*

#### **e) Social and Communications Skills**

Survey participants identified that the development of social and communications skills was another critical expectation of students graduating from the demonstration schools. The lack of social skills is a frequently cited weakness for most incoming students. In this vein, most of these students have not been able to develop these skills due to LD and the corresponding problem in forging social relationships.

*“Social skills: Learning disabilities can affect any area of a person’s life, including how well we learn the social skills that allow us to live with other people: how to make friends, how to interact with peers, how to deal with authority figures, how to fit in. Since our social lives are so central to human lives, deficits in social skills can be as or more debilitating than academic difficulties. While at these schools, students learn various social skills that they may have struggled with prior to entering the school. Students with learning disabilities often have some aspects socially that they struggle with: whether it be communication skills, friendship skills, problem-solving skills or advocacy skills to name a few possibilities. Through individualized programming, students have an opportunity to learn about and practice these skills and strategies with opportunities for direct feedback from staff. One crucial aspect in this skills development is the culture that is in these Provincial schools that allows students to practice and develop these social skills. The culture in these schools fosters a sense of acceptance of difference, patience, respectful assistance, and encouragement. This can make a world of difference for anyone trying to practice new skills.”*

*“Mastery of social skills-i.e.; greeting, asking for help, negotiating, starting a conversation, eye contact, saying goodbye, ending a conversation, joining in, invitations, giving compliments, saying thank you, receiving compliments...the list of basic pro-social skills that most people take for granted are focused on and practiced daily.”*

*“Students need to grow specifically on their social skills, which include building on leadership, communication, etiquette, awareness, trust, healthy relationship skills, and self expression. All of these aspects of skill building are identified in each student at Trillium Demonstration School and programs are individually tailored to ensure students are leaving the program with a plethora of skills to back them up transitioning back to their home boards.”*

*“These kids with LD don’t acquire social skills through osmosis. They need explicit teaching.”*

*“Social skills will be going with me as well. I have learned that balancing myself is important. I need to take time to spend with friends or just relaxing instead of always doing homework and worrying if I will fail.”*

*“The students must have functional social skills that comes from socializing with other students who have similar learning styles and needs as themselves.”*

#### **f) Emotional Management**

A few participants noted that students need to master the skill related to emotional management.

*“Coping skills for emotional management....identifying emotions.”*

*“Emotional regulation.”*



### **g) The Ability to Self-Advocate**

Clearly, the ability to self-advocate has been identified numerous times in the consultations. Participants underscored the importance of this specific skill given that these students with severe LD encounter people who do not understand this type of disability.

*“These students need to understand how to advocate for themselves when they come in conflict with teachers who are refusing their accommodations or teachers/friends who don't understand their disabilities.”*

*“These individuals need to be able to advocate for themselves. Other children like to bully them because they are different. They need to learn how to defend themselves.”*

*“Self advocacy - with most people we might call this communication skills but for people with learning disabilities the ability to advocate for one's own needs is vital to their success. The world that they live in is set up for people who fall within the norm but they are not normal and therefore need to have the world around them modified for their needs. Without them being able to articulate their specific needs, they will not be successful as few people in society understand the nature of learning disabilities in general, let alone an individual's unique learning requirements.”*

*“Advocacy skills: Students leave these schools feeling confident, aware of their learning disabilities and prepared to advocate for their needs when they return to their home boards. Students are taught their rights as a special education student in Ontario. They are also taught ways these rights affect their future as a student and how to ensure they are receiving the education that meets their needs. Students are given many opportunities to practice with staff support and are taught the importance of advocating for their rights as special education students in Ontario.”*

### **h) Understanding their Learning Disability and the Strategies to Cope with It**

Another key skill that the demonstration school students need to have is understanding their learning disability. It is something that students need to understand for the rest of their lives. They need learning tools and strategies.

*“An understanding of their Learning Disability: One key skill that is a crucial skill learned during a student's time at a provincial school program is a true understanding of their learning disability. Students leave knowing their challenges and their strengths. Students learn these skills through the school and through residential social skill programs.”*

*“They need to build strengths and coping skills to manage and understand their learning disability in order to function and advocate for themselves in a system that does not understand them and has not provided for them in the past.”*

*“Because they learn in a different way and need accommodations that are not always readily available to them, it is important for them to be comfortable with themselves and have the ability to speak up and ask for help. Therefore, it is crucial that each student have an in-depth knowledge of what it means to have a learning disability and what they need to get around it.”*

*“Learning Disabilities are a life long condition that will never go away and it not only affects the individual but everyone around them. It is important that not only the student but those around them (family, friends, professionals) are educated and provided with the know-how to help the student when they are not able to help themselves. Demonstration schools provide a community of like-minded people who are there to give assistance, provide guidance and support the student (as well as the families) to achieve their goals.”*

*“They need to understand their learning disability. They need to know how to use the technology to bridge the gap. They need to gain the confidence to advocate for themselves. They need to understand that having a learning disability does not limit their potential.”*



**i) Ability to Use Technology**

One of the frustrations expressed by demonstration school students is access to the appropriate technology combined with the knowledge, skills and support to be able to use this technology. This is important because prior to attending the demonstration schools, technology was sometimes provided but it did not have any impact. Having access to knowledge, skills and support to use technology appropriately is key to students' long-term development.

*“Assistive technology: The students that attend school at the Provincial Demonstration schools have the opportunity to experiment with various types and combinations of assistive technology (Dragon, Kurzweil, Google read and write to name a few). The students have constant support through this process from school and residential staff. Students have their assistive technology and support from adults that know the programs available to them both during class and during homework time. Through this process, students find assistive technology that works for them and their personal learning needs. This allows the students to become increasingly independent in their learning.”*

*“Technology Application: Students here need to be prepared to utilize a wide array of assistive technology to help compensate for their areas of growth and allow them to access the curriculum and fully participate and reach their maximum potential. At Amethyst, the students are taught directly on how to appropriately apply technology to remove barriers when learning or producing curriculum material.”*

*“Knowing how to use assistive technology (AT). For a student with a learning disability, using AT could make or break if you pass the assignment, if you get an 85% or a 49% etc. For example, I was told to write an essay by hand without using AT. I got a 63% on that assignment. Then, a few months later, I was given the same task with a different essay question but this time I used my AT after being trained to use it. I received an 87%. Again, leaving with an understanding of AT can give a student with a learning disability success and can help them level the playing field against a student who doesn't have to struggle with reading/writing.”*

*“The most important skills are technology skills. Programs are changing monthly and yearly so keeping them current are key to allowing them to communicate their thoughts, ideas and finding technology skills that will enable them to build upon their strengths to allow them to reach their full potential.”*

*“Trillium has trained me with new assistive technologies that helped me throughout the program. The programs are Chrome, Google, read and write, smart notes, Google classroom and a set of earphones with Mic. so I can use these programs. The teachers at Trillium taught me that on Apple products, if you hit assist and then you hit Siri, it could read to you and help you spell words out, too.”*

**j) Organizational Skills**

It was also expected that the students attending demonstration schools would learn organizational skills. This was viewed as important given that these students with severe LDs have weak organizational and time management skills.

*“They are taught great organizational skills which helps them especially with reintegration into the regular schools.”*

*“Organizational skills - individuals with learning disabilities often have executive functioning deficits which impacts their ability to stay on track and stay organized. For this reason, it becomes even more vital for learning disabled individuals to develop best practices to stay organized.”*

*“Organizational skills: one challenge that students that come into the Provincial schools commonly have is issues surrounding organization. Students build these skills throughout the year in the highly structured program. This helps students to build these skills for their future endeavors.”*

*“... at a Demonstration School you get drilled every single day to be organized, to have good time management and to put school before social time.”*



*“Organization is important for students to not only keep their belongings/ homework in order but also to keep thoughts in order. Students need to be able to retrieve information and use this information effectively. They need to gain skills in setting priorities and sticking to a task.”*

#### **k) Conflict Resolution Skills**

Some survey participants indicated that the social and academic limitations of students with severe LDs meant they need to develop their conflict resolution skills at the demonstration schools. This skill development was linked to the residential programme.

*“By living at a residential school, he would learn how to problem solve with his classmates, as they are also his roommates at the end of each day. He would learn to compromise and become more understanding of other students’ disabilities. My son would learn to be compassionate of others with difficulties, which would help him in the future when resolving problems, whether in high school, post secondary or as a future employable adult.”*

#### **l) Life Skills**

It is expected by survey respondents that the students with severe LDs who graduate from demonstration schools should be equipped with basic skills to manage daily life.

*“These students also learn a variety of life skills that they can take into their future: signatures, money handling, cooking, grocery shopping, budgeting and various other skills.”*

*“These students need to have a working knowledge of simple daily life skills - the ability to take care of themselves, identify priorities and function in society.”*

*“They should have significantly improved executive functioning and independent living skills.”*

*“Reading a job application, a menu, directions, the newspaper, etc.”*

### **Why these Skills and Knowledge are Important to English Demonstration School Students**

Participants providing input via the online survey believe that it is critically important for demonstration school students to acquire these skills and knowledge in order to become self-sustaining citizens.

There are a number of themes that online survey participants outlined about the importance of the acquisition of these skills and knowledge.

#### **a) Severe Reading Deficits**

Many participants identified severe reading gaps as a significant issue for demonstration school students. Acquiring these reading skills was a key objective.

*“My daughter has a severe reading disability. We have exhausted all the help we can get at the public school system. She is a very smart girl but just can’t read and this school was our last hope.”*

*“When entering the program, my son was way below grade level reading.”*

#### **b) Fallen Between the Cracks in the Regular Public School System**

A number of stakeholders noted that the students who are coming to demonstration schools had fallen between the cracks in the regular school system.

*“These are children who have not found success in the mainstream schools or who have lost the motivation to try because they have fallen through the cracks.”*



**c) Parents Themselves Have Severe LDs**

A number of the parents openly admitted in the online survey that they have severe learning disabilities and the challenges it imposes on parenting children with similar challenges. Some of these parents cannot read or write and have no computer skills whatsoever. In fact, several of them had to dictate their views to someone else who completed the online survey.

These participants underscored the importance of the demonstration schools in giving their children a chance to acquire these skills in order to break the cycle of poverty and welfare.

To quote these parents, *“Students like them end up either in jail, suicide, welfare, medical issues, homeless, or addicted.”*

**d) Lack of Capability and Programming in Boards to Address the Learning Needs of Students with Severe LD**

Online respondents claimed that the school boards were not successful in mitigating the social and academic challenges being faced by students with severe LD.

*“Regular school boards do not have the programs available to re-mediate children past grade 3.”*

**e) Students Entering the Demonstration Schools have Significant Communication, Social and Emotional Challenges**

There were numerous comments that students coming to the demonstration schools had significant communications and social issues.

*“These children are unmotivated, unsuccessful, and very anxious in their home school boards as teachers do not have the time to help them. They do not understand their disabilities nor do they have time to. These children are bullied, ridiculed and belittled by not only peers but teachers also without knowing it sometimes.”*

*“Prior to Sagonaska, even going to the doctor was a challenge because my son was incapable of expressing where pain was or how he was feeling, etc. In other aspects of his life, he had difficulty explaining what he needed or following directions. He had no friends and lacked self-esteem because of his inability to communicate.”*

The following quotes summarize many of the feelings and perspectives expressed by different online participants.

*“Almost invariably, the students come from boards with similar stories of being outcasts, isolated, and pushed along year to year with no success in reading, each year falling further behind and losing more self-confidence.”*

*“To answer this question, one has to understand what skills a severely LD student possesses and the history of experience before entering a demonstration school, as well as what level of social and academic achievements have been made and the dysfunctions that are occurring. When a student comes to one of the Demonstration schools the staff, teachers and counselors observe a student that presents many social, school and individual factors and deficits that demonstrate a person under stress, not to mention the aspects that are presented with a person who is severely learning disabled. What the skilled staff and team members at a demonstration school know is that when an LD student is in an environment where they haven't had the supports to learn effectively, there is a general comparison that is made to their “normal” peers and many self-destructive thoughts occur.”*

*“Below are facts that describe the student prior to coming to a demonstration school:*

- *Individuals with learning disabilities are less socially skilled than same-age peers.*
- *Tend to engage in antisocial behaviour versus a pro-social behaviour when they are pressured by peers.*



- *Use significantly fewer non-verbal and verbal social skills than their same age peers without disabilities.*
- *Individuals with learning disabilities are often treated poorly by peers in cooperative groups when placed in regular classes.*
- *Ignored by peers, baited, complained about to the teacher, and the target for negative remarks. Expectation to perform at the same skill base along with their peers. Emphasis is focused on learning academic skill and content- not on mastery of social behaviour.*
- *Poor decision making abilities based on their weak cognitive functions- i.e., ability to problem solve.*
- *Difficulty generalizing social skills and remedial strategies. Reprimanded for not achieving along with their peers.*
- *Feelings of inadequacy, a sense of isolation and shame.*
- *Require more investment into themselves to develop social skills as they may not come naturally. “*

## **2. What are the best ways to prepare English Demonstration School students to enter the workforce, post secondary education or other pathways and become productive and actively engaged citizens?**

*“It’s like pay now (educate) or pay later (jail, street people).”*

A number of topics and concepts were cited by the participants who provided input through the online consultation tool.

### **a) Demonstration Schools are a Critical Pathway**

Online participants believed that the best way to prepare students with severe LDs was the demonstration schools. The following comments best summarize the views of the online participants who see these schools as an effective way to prepare students to become productive and actively engaged citizens.

*“English Demonstration School students need teachers that can successfully communicate the required lessons with the students. There can be no communication gap or misunderstanding. The teachers need to have the education and training to recognize what each individual student needs to complete this requirement successfully. Also, the classrooms need to cater to the students. Set up in a way that benefits them. The students need to build knowledge and confidence in themselves to enter the workforce or attend post secondary education. So, they need an educational atmosphere that provides the things they need as a special needs person. They also need the opportunity to be independent and to be able to communicate on their own, interact with their peers on their own.”*

*“Fortunately, these skills [listed in response to Q#1] are taught to students who attend Demonstration Schools by qualified, experienced and well equipped teachers and residential staff. All staff work together with the students to support their learning and prepare them for success when they leave the school. Demonstration Schools have been preparing my son to be a successful contributing member of his community because the environment has provided him opportunities he has never experienced at*



*his home school. Students at Demonstration Schools are prepared for their futures as successful contributing members of their community because they experience the following:*

- *They participate and are included in all activities, curricular and co-curricular of the school community.*
- *They are valued as individuals for their unique contributions to school life.*
- *They have no boundaries placed on, or prejudgments made about their capacity for, learning.*
- *They enjoy a safe and secure learning environment.*
- *They enjoy a sense of belonging to a school community that accepts ownership and responsibility for their learning.*
- *They are unencumbered by stereotypical and outdated perspectives on abilities and disabilities."*

*"I believe that demonstration schools could prepare students by teaching them how to work with their disability, become independent by boarding at the demonstration school and learn how to use devices that will help them excel in the workforce, post secondary education and other pathways. As a parent of a child with a disability, I believe that Demonstration Schools are crucial to our children having a fighting chance for their futures".*

*"Students who attend demonstration schools also experience, some for the first time, a sense of belonging to a community, wherein each member has both needs and gifts. In the small group setting of the Demonstration School classroom, students build confidence, find their voice, and experience success, guided by skilled teachers, IT staff, and counsellors. The "baggage" of feeling stupid, the fear of participation, and social isolation (which develops after years of being passed from grade to grade in regular school) is replaced by an understanding of LD and ways to overcome the related challenges. In addition, students experience the relief of learning that LD students are "normal" kids who learn differently. The comradery shared by students who attend Demonstration Schools helps remove the stigma of the label, helps students advocate for their academic needs, and empowers them to meet with future success."*

*"This is the exact reason why my son needs to attend Amethyst school. I don't know how to prepare him. I have an older daughter who does not have a learning disability. I never imagined how difficult, worrisome, and emotionally exhausting it can be at times. I fear for his future. I'm heartbroken to see his low self-esteem. My son is an intelligent kid but he is failing in the public system because they are not equipped to teach him. He can't learn in a big classroom. He has ADHD (medicated since Jr. Kindergarten!) , anxiety, central auditory processing issues-no P300 responses at all-the technician actually told me "they were garbage" and on top of that he had surgery on his one eye in Gr. 5 for a muscle weakness and 4th nerve repair so he couldn't even track properly but would pass eye charts. When he reaches late teens or early adulthood, he will have to have surgery on the other eye too as it will become too weak as well. We had so much hope going through the application process and now we are just holding our breath on what's to come not knowing what to do!"*

*"The program that I was taught at the Amethyst school in the 1990s was perfect in preparing me for my future education and career. The program is intensive and modified for my specific needs and is taught in small student number classes. I have since gone on to get an electrical engineering degree from Queens University, a masters in business administration from the University of Windsor, and many other specialized certifications in my area of expertise. I have now taught as a sessional instructor at the university level for three years during which I was the second highest rated professor in my program. I now work for one of the world's largest sovereign wealth management funds."*





## **b) Specialized Teaching Focused on Individual Learning Styles of Students with Severe LDs**

A variety of online participants provided some detail on their views on how students with severe LD should have access to specialized teaching methods.

*“Research indicates that all of the following four components need to be an integral part of the services and supports that are available to people with learning disabilities in order to help them achieve their goals and overcome any barriers resulting from the condition.*

- *“Specific skill instruction” describes appropriate teaching and training that is built on an individual’s identified strengths. It focuses on the development of compensatory strategies in those weaker skill areas where the learning disability interferes with the learning process. Specific skill instruction must be individualized. The teaching/ training process must be adjusted to match the individual’s learning style, rather than assuming that the individual will eventually learn, no matter what the teaching process is, provided that “he/she tries harder”. Traditional remedial techniques of teaching, testing and re-teaching in essentially the same way frequently do not work for students with learning disabilities. Examples of specific skill instruction include differentiated teaching strategies, for example, reducing the number of tasks without reducing the standard or expected quality; allowing for an extended learning period to achieve mastery; reteaching a particular skill in a substantially different way than that used to instruct the rest of the class; and emphasizing the importance of acquiring learning and compensatory strategies.*
- *“Compensatory strategies” are ways in which individuals who have learning disabilities can apply coping skills to help themselves overcome the impacts of their learning disabilities, without necessarily having to rely on the assistance of other people or draw particular attention to their needs. Examples of successful compensatory strategies include using colour-coding, applying visual cues such as highlighting, drawing arrows, using a notepad or a handheld tape recorder to ensure that directions are not forgotten, learning a format for approaching certain complex tasks, etc.*
- *“Self-advocacy training” is an essential part of enabling and empowering people with learning disabilities to identify and ask for the accommodations that they need in order to achieve their potential. Successful self-advocacy relies on self-awareness and a thorough understanding of personal strengths and difficulties.*
- *“Accommodations” are defined as alterations and changes in the way individuals with disabilities are enabled to function to demonstrate and apply their skills and knowledge. Accommodations are aimed at eliminating or ameliorating a disadvantage without altering the validity of the work in doing so. Examples of successful accommodations may include using adaptive technology, getting assistance from another person such as a note taker or scribe or having extra time to carry out certain tasks. It is particularly important that any identified and recommended accommodations are directly linked to the strengths and needs of the person with a learning disability. The obligation to provide accommodations is mandated in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human Rights Code. This obligation applies throughout the individual’s life span Demonstration schools provide all of these services!!!!!!”*

## **c) Residential Program is a Key Component in Helping Students with Severe LD**

A number of participants believed that the residential program is a highly important module in helping those students with severe LD:



*“The residential component works with the students to teach them life skills, for example learning about other people who have learning disabilities and have become successful, coping strategies for self-advocacy, problem solving and interacting appropriately in social circles. They need to learn awareness of their skills and explore career options suited to them and how to navigate the post secondary institutions (e.g. accommodations for students with disabilities, bursaries, partial load, more time for tests, note takers etc.). Often times, they have parents who have an LD and are not able to guide them through post -secondary institutions.”*

*“The Demonstrational School Residential Program allows for students to continue improving their academic skills once the school hours have finished. Students will spend at least an hour every night working on their reading skills and other academic skills with the support of student support counsellors. Each day, student support counsellors meet with teachers to discuss each of the students and which areas the students are succeeding and which areas may need further attention.”*

*“Residence programs can also focus on helping students develop their social skills. Often LD students do not have age appropriate social skills and living in residence is the most direct way of improving these skills. Staff can monitor how students interact with their peers, how they interact with adults, how they build relationships and if they have adequate independence and hygiene skills. Staff can observe which of these skills are lacking and work with the student to improve these skills.”*

**d) 18/5 Immersion**

Underlying many of the comments made by participants was the belief that these students require a program offering 18 hours/5 days a week immersion. The following comment sums up this perspective:

*“They need to be immersed in a 24-hour learning environment with other students like themselves so they feel comfort and belonging. Teaching life skills (i.e.: money handling, organization, household skills such as cooking and laundry, etc) is imperative to a successful life of a learning disabled individual. Being able to make good decisions on a daily basis as well as being able to weigh out options in the bigger life changing decisions is something that they need to be taught to do - something that is not taught in the regular school system. Being taught to adapt to new situations and surroundings is often needed as well. Students with Learning Disabilities have deficits in many different social skills. Teaching the student how to build meaningful relationships, communicate their needs and become an assertive individual are just a few ways to prepare them for success. Providing a safe environment where both individual and group social skills are taught to these students while in the residential program is something that has been proven to contribute to these students becoming successful in the future.”*

**e) Being with a Peer Group with Similar Challenges**

A number of participants believed one of the keys in remediating students with severe LD is putting them together where they can move forward together:

*“They need to be with others like themselves so that they know that they are not alone and so they can make friends and be adequately socialized. In the school board, they are frequently put in class with others with different types of needs, so a few needs of everyone are met but not much is met for everyone. Kids are not given all the services that they need at once, put on endless waiting lists, given a minimal amount of service to get them by, only to have to be put on another waiting list for the next block they are entitled to if they are entitled at all.”*

**f) Alternative Methods are Required such as E-learning**

A few people suggested that alternatives methods should be considered.

*“The students also often require alternative methods of learning and completing tasks. Traditional methods have obviously not worked for these students or they would not have fallen so far behind in their reading and other subjects.”*



**g) Assistive Technology is Key**

Echoing other parts of the online consultation survey responses, assistive technology was viewed as a key component in preparing these students:

*“A common example of an alternative method is full usage of assistive technology. Allowing a student access to a device (smart phone, iPod, iPad/tablet) at all times and teaching them the skills necessary to being fully independent with these devices can allow the student to overcome a lot of the hurdles in their way. These devices can be used for speech-to-text and text-to-speech purposes, searching for information or answers on the internet, organizational tools to time-manage and many other purposes.”*

**h) Every School Board should Seriously Consider the use of Empower**

One participant asserted that every school board in Ontario should seriously consider the use of Empower:

*“First, you need to have every school board in the province using the same reading program and their staff trained properly. If research shows that EMPOWER is the program of choice, why are all school boards not forced into purchasing, training and using this program....The importance of using EMPOWER and technology is the most important factor in ensuring students will be able to leave the school and enter the workforce or post secondary education. However, in order to do this, the students need to be properly prepared for high school.”*

**i) Why are Dedicated LD Classes at a School Board less Effective than Classes at the Demonstration Schools?**

One participant provided a perspective on why self-contained classes are less effective than the demonstration school classes:

*“The best method to date for LD students in Ontario is to attend a Demonstration school. The success rate of Demonstration school children far out strips those in the main stream. We often receive students from the boards who have been in self-contained LD classrooms. Quite simply, they don't work nearly as well for a couple of key reasons.*

- The students remain in their home school environment, and therefore keep with them all of the negative history between teachers, administrators and peers. Often this negative history is generational in nature and is not easily dispensed of. By providing them a "reset" of their educational experience, they return older, more mature and with the ability to read.*
- In local school boards, students are at the mercy of the teacher they received that year. Teachers, like any other profession, are not all created equal. Some are great, many are OK, and some are just plain bad. Teachers from local boards seconded to a Demonstration school are highly motivated to continue their secondment as it often opens new career paths for them. In short, these teachers are normally the motivated, high achievers who are driven and in turn pass on this driven nature to their students. Seconded teachers also know that if they fail to perform or fit into the culture of learning, their secondment will be terminated. In a local board, teaching positions are regulated more by collective agreements, seniority, and administrators looking to hide problems. Teachers know that their individual performance (short of gross misconduct) is not a contingent factor on keeping their position. Students selected to attend a Demonstration school are exceptional, and in turn they require exceptional teachers.”*

**j) Extend the Tenure of Demonstration School Students beyond Two Years**

A few participants wanted students to have an opportunity to stay at the school beyond the current two years:

*“Extended more years at Demonstration Schools instead of limit to two years to give the students more time to prepare themselves and receive support from qualified staff at their Demonstration school to*



*enter workforce, post-secondary education or other pathways and become productive actively engaged citizens.”*

**k) Getting into a Demonstration School is like Winning the Lottery**

There were a few participants who thought getting into the demonstration school was like a lottery win.

*“Only 40 lucky kids will get into Amethyst. I was considering applying for my son for 2017, but also know it may never be an option attainable for him. What must be done for a chance to win the Amethyst lottery? First we must apply. To qualify, he must be significantly delayed. Then comes the: - doctor visits -resource teacher evaluations -academic assessments -psych. ed. assessment -behaviour assessments - all the paper work -the five binders -the interviews -the waiting -the anxiety of wondering and waiting -the final outcome - well - no guarantees for the parent of a child with a severe reading disability.”*

**l) Demonstrations Schools are not Appropriate**

One participant argued against demonstration schools on the grounds that it is better to have students educated in their home communities:

*“I strongly advocate that the province's specialized schools are the wrong approach to educate children who have a provincially recognized exceptionality. By concentrating these children in one place, their home school districts are not required to provide education for all children and youth in their catch area. Consequently, the fabric of communities is poorer by the absence of families and their children.”*

### **3. Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive experience for English Demonstration School students and their families?**

#### **Demonstration Schools**

There are a number of trends in the responses related to this question.

The most prevailing response in the online survey was the retention of the demonstration schools as the primary means of addressing the learning needs of students with severe LDs.

Participants believe that these schools have been highly effective and that mainstream schools do not have the capacity, resources and tools to address the needs of students with severe LDs. In fact, a number of online participants felt that demonstrations schools should be expanded and more accessible.

*“Moving forward, I feel that keeping the Demonstration Schools open is essential for the success of children with Learning Disabilities. It has been my experience that children with severe Learning Disabilities are NOT receiving the intervention in mainstream schools that they need to be successful in life.”*

*“Continuing with the demonstration schools. The success of these programs can be found in both their immersive nature and the symbiotic relationship between the special educators and the student. The special educators learned as much as the students: many special educators shadowed students through the program. Both the special educators and the students learned coping strategies, learned behaviour, learned lessons to be brought home to their schools after the program. The special educators learned effective methods in teaching and assisting students with LDs. The immersive program is highly successful for all parties.”*

*“The schools provided an environment for learning of all essential academic skills as well as the development of personal and social skills necessary to be effective learners in the future. Students who*



*have gone to a demonstration school for one or two years return with a confidence that they have the ability to continue in the public education system.”*

*“Further funding given to the English Demonstration Schools would allow these schools to expand their programs and provide more services to the students. Having the maximum capacity of these schools raised would also further justify adding more resources and programs to these schools.”*

Online participants identified a number of programs and services that create a positive experience for students:

#### **Overall Program**

- Intensive immersion – 5 days a week/18 hours a day program
- 200 minutes per day of reading
- Focus on literacy
- Residential programme
- Safe Learning environment
- Active lifestyle – structured extracurricular activities reinforcing in-class activities

#### **Teaching Approach**

- Academic program that challenges students
- Teaching style that adapts to students’ learning style
- Individualized, specialized programming
- Small teacher: student ratio – 1:5 or 1:7
- Association Method

#### **Qualified Residential Staff**

- *“Qualified Child and Youth Care Workers for residential staff”*

#### **Extensive Use of Technology and Software**

- Enhance assistive technology with appropriate support and training
- Empower program
- Lexia program
- *“Laptops and iPads with text to speech or speech to text”*
- *“Dragon Natural Speaking, Word Q, Word, PowerPoint, and Excel”*

#### **Parental Engagement and Communications**

- Consistent and direct communication with family by teachers and administrators
- Parental workshops – teaching the parents the skills that their children are learning
- More parental involvement and communications – *“Having open, timely, professional communication between parents and staff is tantamount to promoting an effective, positive experience for a student in any educational institution.”*
- Active lifestyle – structured extracurricular activities reinforcing in-class activities
  - “The full-team approach - having access to our social worker, nursing staff, psychiatrist, psychologist, speech and language pathologist, specialized special education teachers, residential counsellors with child youth care backgrounds.”*
  - “Family engagement is important. Parents need to ensure there is an open line of communication in order to carry over the work that is being done at school. Internet programs which allow the students to directly interact with their teacher beyond school hours have proven effective in ensuring expectations are*



*communicated and support is constant. Especially with today's plugged in world, opportunities for these children to communicate over the Internet is not only convenient, but very functional.*

*"Schools could offer workshops for the parents that would include some of the following - technology training which their children are learning, parent/student rights and advocating when students return to their home school, specific LDs and mental health concerns, career aptitudes for students with LDs."*

#### **Earlier Assessments and Diagnosis**

- *"Diagnosis and assessments that don't take a long period of time. The delays and gaps in services are impacting learning opportunities."*

#### **Transitioning Back to the Home School**

- *"Continue to work with the school boards in developing plans for transitioning the severely learning disabled students back into their boards with support and success and new interventions."*
- *"A follow-up program for when the child returns home in order to get the home based school on board and keep them on board engaging kids in community-based activities, having them go into other schools and present and mentor."*
- *"Ongoing information sharing and knowledge exchange between parents – perhaps, a parent support group/system navigation"*
- *"Continued support for the student moving on to a new school. A specialized teacher in the home school for continued updating of technology advances that are beneficial for the learning disabled."*

#### **A Team of Professionals**

- *"Having a multi-disciplinary approach"*
- Access to social workers, psychologists, tutoring, extensive and intensive reading and writing

#### **Transferring Knowledge and Skills to School Boards**

- *"Continue to work with the school boards in training for the average learning disabled students that can be maintained within the board by sharing our expertise".*
- *"Developing and posting webinars with our highly skilled staff and sharing on the web page for our out of reach parents would also be a great way to showcase our excellence."*

#### **Understanding Better Outcomes and Long-term Impact**

- *"Data collection from past student achievement and outcomes."*
- Provide more outreach to alumni

#### **Provision of Resource Consultants to Local School Boards**

- *"Workshops by resource services to local school boards including assistive technology training and understanding the student with a learning disability are important to help school boards support their students. These should be on-going and regularly scheduled and not just as needed. "*

#### **A Larger Role for Demonstration Schools**

There were a few online participants who saw a larger role for demonstration schools in order to serve more students who have severe LD:

*"Further funding given to the English Demonstration Schools would allow these schools to expand their programs and provide more services to the students. Having the maximum capacity of these schools raised would also further justify adding more resources and programs to these schools."*

*"More kids would mean a bigger community for these students to thrive in and more opportunity for growth"*



*“Double the amount of students admitted to demonstration schools..... There are too many kids who leave school illiterate because they didn’t have the chance to go to a demonstration school.”*

Several participants argued for an expansion, but by creating satellite programs throughout the province:

*“Create satellite programs through the school boards..... Continue using Amythest, Sagonaska, and Trillium as they were designed to be used.....Possibly consolidate the location to one school if the need is for the PSB to downsize.”*

*“If anything I feel one of these schools with the programs and services should be in "Northern Ontario", Thunder Bay would be great. Our son travels 7-25 hours one way per week, pending weather, to and from school. Thunder Bay would be very beneficial spot for "Northern Students" but that would also mean more students would attend and benefit and the government would have to spend more dollars.”*

A few participants took an entirely different view by wondering how these demonstration schools can operate and suggested a different service delivery model:

*“I’ve often found it odd the demonstration schools operate entirely separate of the standard school system. With video conferencing becoming more common, do we still need to separate these students from their families for the whole week? If integrated into a remote support system to the standard school system what would be lost/gained?”*

*“Keep kids in their local community rather than sending their son/daughter out of town for the week.”*

*“Every effort must be made to ensure school boards have the appropriate staff and that the staff have the capacity to fully meet the needs of these students; students and parents must be assured these needs can and will be met within an inclusive school.”*

However, a participant wondered whether a broad-based program with few resources would have much impact:

*“A broad based program that spreads resources thinly across all school boards is not what is required for students with severe learning disabilities. Focused, intense, and strategic programs are what is required for these students.”*

## D Robarts School for the Deaf

### 1. What knowledge and skills do Robarts students need to have when they leave school?

There were a number of themes emerge regarding the expectations for Robarts students when they leave school. It is important that many of these themes are interrelated.

#### a) Robarts’ Students Should Have the Same Skills and Knowledge as Other Ontario Students

Many participants talked about the importance that Robarts students have the same skills and knowledge that all other Ontario students have:

*“In my opinion, when students leave Robarts they should have the same skills and knowledge as any student who graduates from any school in Ontario. They should qualify to graduate with a diploma. They should understand English. They should be able to read and write in English well enough to pass the high school literacy testing. Life skills.”*



*"Students must be aware of their learning skills and understanding of the curriculum. Students at Robarts are able to do this in a fully accessible environment."*

*"Robarts students need the same thing all students need when they leave school."*

*"Students must be aware of their learning skills and understanding of the curriculum."*

*"They need to have literacy skills in reading and writing at a comparable level to hearing students, numeracy skills at a comparable level and social skills to interact with the hearing world."*

*"Students at Robarts need to have successfully completed the Ontario curriculum in order that they can have the same opportunities that all students throughout Ontario have."*

## **b) Development of Bilingual Language Capabilities**

The consideration of ASL, bilingualism and cultural identity was a prominent theme cited by online respondents.

*"Teaching [to] the many learning gaps Deaf children have when they enter school at the age of 4 and continue to have due to missing incidental learning from lack of auditory exposure (i.e. overhearing your parents at the dinner table, fully comprehending concepts seen on TV) . 90% of children who are Deaf come from hearing parents and have little to no language exposure before they enter school. Education for Deaf children needs to be accomplished through adults who understand these students."*

*"They need to have the capacity to express themselves fluently in ASL to others in the community and to understand the importance of ASL."*

*"They need a strong sense of identity and self-esteem to enable them to navigate their world as a person of a minority linguistic culture with these skills in language, literacy, self expression, and community."*

*"When they leave our school, they need to be able to communicate with other Deaf individuals and have developed the confidence and skills to communicate effectively with hearing individuals. They need to have a strong foundation in ASL as well as English reading and writing. One of the strengths of the bicultural/bilingual environment is that they are surrounded by staff who have strong foundations in all of that and are able to help them develop those skills through modeling, use of the ASL Gloss program, etc."*

*"The Robarts students need to be able to be fluent in both ASL, English speaking and writing."*

*"They need a fluent first language. They need literacy in this fluent first language. They need literacy in a second Canadian language."*

*"Able to get access 100 percent ASL/English to help the person to grow independent."*

*"There is also a need for them to have full access and understanding of their language - ASL."*

*"We live in the multicultural and multilingual (diverse) society in Canada, especially in Ontario. Research in linguistic fields often strongly suggests that bilingual children show more development in cognitive, linguistic, and meta-linguistic processes than monolingual children."*

*"Deaf children need equal education in their own language to gain the knowledge to be able to adapt in our society. We need to have our children to be strong emotionally and they need to feel they belong to be able to strive higher when they leave Robarts."*





*“Developing competency skills in English as well as the concept development provided by being immersed in an ASL teaching and learning environment is critical to the long term success of Deaf students attending the provincial schools.”*

*“Expert knowledge of ASL (Deaf students mainstreamed in public schools often know only a few ASL signs, but cannot communicate or hold a conversation in ASL, and end up being isolated after graduation, on top of being isolated for many years in their public schools).”*

*“90% of children who are Deaf come from hearing parents and have little to no language exposure before they enter school. Education for Deaf children needs to be accomplished through adults who understand these students.”*

### **c) Developing a Cultural Identity**

In the same vein, it was suggested by online participants that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to develop a strong Deaf identity to help them navigate the hearing world.

*“Deaf students in schools for the Deaf develop an important sense of who they are, and develop a natural language through interactions with others like them. A signing teacher, or a teacher who knows how to sign, is not enough. It needs to be a teacher or staff with at least level three ASL skills (level four is the top level). Deaf students are isolated in public schools, and after graduation, they are often lost (we call them “the lost people”). They cannot really sign well, they cannot communicate perfectly with anyone, in any form of communication. When Deaf students leave schools of the Deaf, they have networks of Deaf people. They end up costing the province and taxpayers less money - by going to college, finding jobs, living regular lives and paying taxes themselves, instead of relying on welfare.”*

*“They need a strong sense of identity and self-esteem to enable them to navigate their world as a person of a minority linguistic culture. With these skills in language, literacy, self expression, and community, they can do anything which suits them when they leave school.”*

*“The feeling of belonging as a well rounded citizen of society with full access to the language of ASL, the Culture of the Deaf which includes life at a School for the Deaf, and an identity which they feel comfortable with as a member of the Deaf community.”*

*“Deaf culture. This is what they need. And they can’t live without it. Leaving Deaf school is going to hurt them, their education, and their future.”*

### **d) Development of Self-Esteem, Confidence, Ability to Self-Advocate and Leadership Skills**

Online respondents identified the development of self-esteem, self-confidence, the ability to self-advocate and leadership skills as key skills that need to be learned by students.

*“Students especially deaf should be prompted to have self-confidence and leadership ability in order for them to achieve for the best in their future like obtaining a degree, finding a job, etc.”*

*“Students need to have leadership opportunities for them to develop skills in becoming active citizens.”*

*“Along with this they need to develop the self-confidence to ensure they consider themselves as valued, able, and every bit as worthy and important as hearing people.”*

*“Ways to advocate for themselves.”*

### **e) Able to Become Critical Thinkers**

A few online participants believe that students need to be able to think critically.



*“They need to be able to think critically, to ask questions they generate themselves. They need the arts as a way to interpret the world and themselves.”*

*“They need to be able to think critically to answer questions posed to them.”*

#### **f) Development of Life and Work Skills**

Some online participants suggested that it is important for these students to develop life skills and knowhow.

*“Having already worked in the residential program at Robarts, I was amazed to see how many of these students, the best educated, still lacked life skills. Many of them had no idea how to grocery shop (i.e.: make a menu, develop a list, shop the flyers for better prices etc.), do laundry, set up a bank account, fill out forms (even know what a signature was, as opposed to initials), manage their money/spending, pay bills, manage their time wisely etc. “*

*“The ability to pay bills and rent/mortgage.”*

*“Deaf students have to be able to learn how to excel in a workplace that is composed of non-Deaf people, and finally, basic career skills like knowing how to find jobs, writing a resume, how to conduct themselves in an interview, etc.”*

*“Appropriate transition plans with a pathway plan that involves ensuring that all students have a plan for success whether it is in the trades, post-secondary education or school to work. Acquiring skills that will allow Deaf students to access work, particularly in fields where there are perceptions that Deaf young people could not be successful.”*

#### **g) Opportunities for Physical and Social Activity**

Some online participants suggested that physical and social health are important skills for these students to develop.

*“Robarts students need to have social understanding and decoding - learning strategies in their toolbox when they leave school. From a social perspective, Robarts students learn to develop and personalize social understandings.”*

*“A healthy social life with many Deaf peers, to use and communicate in ASL (a few Deaf peers is not a healthy social life).”*

*“They need opportunities to be physically and socially active to affirm their place in their communities.”*

## **2. What are the best ways to prepare Robarts students to enter the workforce, post secondary education or other pathways and become productive and actively engaged citizens?**

Online respondents identified 12 concepts as potential ways to prepare Robarts' School students to be prepared for the workforce and post-secondary education.

#### **a) Robarts' was viewed as a key pathway to being a productive and engaged citizen**

For many online respondents, Robarts School was viewed as a key pathway for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

*“Through their experiences at Robarts, students will learn about interacting with the community, utilizing their strengths and how to improve on their challenges to best meet the expectations of their future life paths. During their education at Robarts, students will be involved in courses to learn about how to improve their skills, create resumes, take classes or courses that are required for their interests and career paths. Students have the opportunity to learn about various topics that are required of*



*them to become actively engaged citizens - especially within the community (Deaf or hearing). With strong ties to the community, students are provided with responsible and successful role models who can advise them and provide many examples of success for their future."*

*"I think the best way to prepare Robarts students to enter the workforce, post-secondary or other pathways is to simply continue the amazing learning that happens there. These learners struggle and feel lost in a regular learning environment. Robarts provides them the ability to learn and be successful."*

**b) Robarts' students need to be fluent in their first language (ASL) and develop a bilingual literacy capacity**

Online participants clearly identified bilingual language development as an important pathway forward.

*"The best way to prepare Robarts students for the world is to give them unrestricted access to a fluent first language, literacy in at least two Canadian languages including their own first language, the ability to ask and answer questions, a sense of identity and community through the arts and physical and social activity among peers and community members. Bilingual literacy is key. Beyond this, the answer is similar to any student's preparation for the world, give them the tools and access and then support them to engage with the world around them before leaving school and you will set them up for life."*

*"Provide instruction in ASL so that the material presented by the teacher is 100% accessible to the students 100% of the time. Technology is wonderful, and devices such as cochlear implants can make a tremendous difference for many kids. However, they do not turn a Deaf child into a hearing child - they turn a Deaf child into a hard of hearing child. And that's when they're successful. Such devices don't work or work well for all kids. I'd rather have my child access 100% of the material in ASL than 50%, 70%, or even 90% of the material in English. This also means making sure that the teachers are qualified to teach the Ontario curriculum in ASL, which means ensuring that there is an appropriate pathway for teachers to attain these qualifications. As much as possible, Deaf teachers should be chosen. This is partly because they will have the greatest fluency in the language, and partly because they will also serve as role models for the children to aspire to."*

*"When appropriate, offer voice lessons for students who have an aptitude for spoken language."*

*"An excellent educational curriculum based in ASL and the bilingual-bicultural teaching model. Deaf staff are needed to provide modeling for Deaf children. They need a strong social network with their Deaf peers and a good understanding of their capabilities to succeed as Deaf adults in the mainstreamed world."*

*"Ensure that English skills are acquired and that English is considered a priority alongside ASL. Ensure that teachers are competent at both ASL and English in order to ensure that students are immersed in both languages from pre-school to graduation."*

*"Having Deaf staff or staff with ASL users, they are the ones who teach Robarts students everything - life skills, education and work experience to enter the workforce, post secondary education or other pathways. ASL is very important in student's lives for understanding and learning."*

*"One of the best ways is to make sure students are in a language rich environment. At Robarts, the languages are ASL and English. Most easily accessible and most natural is ASL, but there are multiple supports for English. The ASL Gloss program has the research to back it up that focusing on the acquisition of ASL boosts not only ASL skills but English reading skills as well. Students who have the benefit of this program test only months behind their hearing peers of the same age group. A strong language foundation prepares them to become strong in numeracy as well which in turn prepares them for life after high school."*



**c) Being exposed to the Deaf community, culture, and having role models is essential**

A number of the online participants underscored the role of the Deaf schools in building connections, common community and identity. There is a fear that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing will be left behind without it.

*“While resources in schools boards, such as itinerant teachers of the Deaf and sign language interpreters are steps in the right direction, a Deaf or hard of hearing student will still feel isolated if they are the only one in their school or board. That lack of connectivity to their peers and dependence on others to access information will only leave them at a disadvantage when it comes to future prospects. Access to information and language are part of a duality of imperative life experience; Culture and group belonging is the other. One without the other only leaves our children behind.”*

*“Full ASL access at a school for the Deaf enables students to feel a sense of belonging to be able to succeed....Self- identity as a Deaf community member helps form the person that they are.”*

*“Provide an educational institution where they have both good Hearing and Deaf role models (Deaf teachers, Deaf staff) that they can look up to and be able to know they can be successful. These role models must play an encouraging and active role towards every Deaf student to find their full potential.”*

*“I feel that other role models would be adults and families in the Deaf community, especially those with Deaf parents/siblings/children, because their families have no communication barriers, right from a young age. This in turn allows them to have all the childhood/adolescent/young adult experiences and nurturing that hearing children with hearing parents have.”*

**d) Early acquisition of language skills is critical to long-term success**

Several participants asserted that it is critical that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing acquire language training as early as possible otherwise cognitive delays can develop.

*“Ensure that students do not have a language delay right from the start. This means exposing them to language as soon as possible - ideally from birth. Sign language such as ASL can be used to establish a first language very early in life, and can aid with acquisition of other languages. This is why in Sweden, families are required to learn Swedish Sign Language if their child is going to be entering the cochlear implant program. Kids who have a language delay can develop cognitive delays, and then struggle academically for the rest of their lives. An early start is key to long term success.”*

**e) Provide a motivating and supportive learning environment**

One participant called for a motivating and supportive environment that teaches students who are Deaf or hard of hearing in appropriate ways.

*“Don’t aim low. Deaf students (without other complicating learning disabilities) are just as intelligent as their hearing counterparts, and are perfectly capable of achieving excellence. They just need to be encouraged and supported along the way, and taught in ways that are appropriate to their deafness. What they don’t need is a system that expects them to fail, or worse, a system that tries to teach them in ways that are completely inappropriate for Deaf or hard of hearing children.”*

**f) Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to have access to specialized education and teachers**

Online participants talked about the need for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing needing access to specialized teachers and resources.

*“The best ways to prepare Robarts students for their futures is to provide them with teachers and staff who are specialized in educating Deaf/hard of hearing children. They need to be educated alongside their peers so they can begin building social skills with others who interact in the same ways that they*



*do. The specialized technology, teachers, and resources to help these children are not accessible at most public schools.”*

**g) Consider alternative programming to teach students who are Deaf or hard of hearing**

One participant felt that some programming innovation (e.g. e-learning) was required whereby all students who are Deaf or hard of hearing from across Ontario could access specialized teachers.

*“Consider alternative learning programs that don't require students to be present or to live at the school (e.g. e-learning, co-op, independent learning courses) that allow all students in Ontario an opportunity to tap into the expertise of teachers of the Deaf regardless of where they are in the province.”*

**h) Gaps between ASL and Oral approach is creating learning gaps**

One participant expressed that division of ASL and Oral language into two streams was creating learning gaps.

*“Teacher preparation (Deaf AQ) is currently divided into two streams, ASL or Oral language. This has created a lack of overall knowledge in teachers who are instructing children who are Deaf or hard of hearing. This knowledge gap has been translated into children falling through the cracks and not accessing appropriate services early because teachers are not aware of all of the teaching and learning strategies and educational options available to students. Addressing this would help get students into programs that support their learning sooner.”*

**i) Teaching ASL to families with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing is viewed as highly important**

This theme of teaching ASL to families with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing was raised numerous times by online respondents.

*“I think we need to do a much better job at educating our Deaf children's hearing parents and families when it comes to ASL. These families need that communication in order to develop those strong bonds and nurturing support that is crucial throughout their formative years and beyond. As Helen Keller stated, “... blindness cuts you off from things, but deafness cuts you off from people.”*

**j) All students who are Deaf or hard of hearing need to have a smooth transition to the hearing world**

A few online respondents emphasized the need for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to be supported in the transition to the hearing world.

*“To keep Deaf schools open and expand programs to prepare them for their future like expanding athletic programs, being involved with academic bowls (in the states), sending them on field trips to universities, etc. All students require a smooth transition to the real world.”*

*“Take advantage of current community partners that have opened their doors for students to have workplace experience in actual business environments.”*

**k) Critical that students who are Deaf or hard of hearing acquire work skills**

A related theme was the acquisition of work skills by students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

*“Our students would benefit from work experience or co-op programs (in high school) in order to get out into the world and see what the possibilities are.”*

*“Co-op terms could be really helpful for students to explore what job opportunities suit them best and how to tweak their specific roles to work with their hearing impairment if necessary. Building networks and connecting with employers through co-op could really give Deaf students opportunities to show what they are capable of where they may not be given that chance out of high school.”*



*“Most employers want soft-skills. Job related skills can be taught on job or in post-sec.”*

**l) The Ministry of Education needs to collaborate with local school boards on how they can accommodate Robarts students**

One participant believes that the Ministry of Education needs to engage in a dialogue with local school boards about how they can support Robarts’ day students. One individual outlined a plan on how this could be undertaken.

*“The PSB should enter into careful dialogue with all the local school boards who currently send day students to Robarts to explore how they can support those families and students who attend PSB schools. It is clear that Robarts cannot possibly provide the rich educational experiences that are available at the other two provincial schools for the Deaf. It is necessary to have a larger pool of students in order to establish effective learning groups and provide peers with whom these children can interact and grow socially, emotionally and academically. Parents need to be assured that they have options that meet their child’s needs. Options should include the local boards collaborating to establish local joint programs for Deaf and hard of hearing students. By locating such programs within a vibrant and culturally sensitive school and ensuring additional staff (Teachers of the Deaf/interpreters and other support help) the current students would have better access to a full range of student program options and age appropriate peers. Current PSB staff could be initially seconded to help with transitions. Some of the significant savings should be devoted to some additional staffing and resources at the other schools to help with students who are not receiving the tutoring or mental health support as well. Much more support also needs to be allotted to helping all parents of Deaf children learn ASL which is not well addressed at all. There are a number of highly qualified staff at PSB who are available to undertake an internal discussion to make such initiatives a reality!!!!”*

**3. Moving forward, what programs and services would provide a positive experience for Robarts students and their families?**

Online participants provided a range of perspectives about moving forward with regard to the provision of positive experiences for Robarts School students and their families.

**a) Robarts School should Remain Open**

There were numerous comments about the need to keep Robarts open.

*“Keep the Robarts school open.”*

*“Keeping school options like Robarts where students are taught by teachers fluent in ASL and have opportunities to interact on a daily basis with similar peers (e.g. also Deaf/hard of hearing).”*

*“Robarts School for the Deaf offers full inclusion, quality bilingual and bicultural programs for every Deaf child from 3.5 years old to 21 years old with supportive educational staff with bilingual background and cultural sensitivity awareness. Robarts is always ready to offer students programs while other school boards do not: the use of American Sign Language (ASL) on a daily basis and fully, appropriate trained teachers (and school staff) working to meet Deaf children’s needs, educationally, socially or emotionally.”*

**b) Educational Curriculum Needs to be Bilingual**

A number of online participants highlighted the importance of delivering a bilingual education to students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.



*“An educational curriculum based on ASL, bilingual and the bicultural teaching model, extracurricular activities that will allow Deaf students to have leadership opportunities that they will not have in the mainstreamed school environment.”*

*“Another service Robarts should consider is incorporating cochlear implant services - a lot of Hearing parents are ramming cochlear implants into their Deaf infants. I have several friends who had cochlear implants installed and they wish they were never forced to speak. If the law allows cochlear implants, at least these children should deserve a chance to learn sign language and meet other peers who are Deaf or have cochlear implants. I understand that Stockholm, Sweden more than 90% of the students attending Deaf school have cochlear implants and they are raised learning how to communicate using spoken and sign language. I see this as a very positive environment for those children.”*

*“Admission criteria should be reviewed to support students who have “limited access to oral speech production or comprehension”. There are some learners who could benefit from an ASL environment (with auditory dysynchrony for example) that may have less than a 55db hearing loss. The criteria should be about access and production of oral language not about hearing.”*

*“Complete access to the Deaf and hearing communities, bilingual/bicultural educational setting.”*

**c) Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Need to be Educated and Socialized in ASL**

Many participants stressed the importance of learning ASL as one of the languages learned by students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

*“A full ASL environment for learning and developing. The sense of belonging and a place where there is full access to education, incidental learning and social development via ASL.”*

*“You need to provide programs where deafness is the norm where students are able to actively participate in classroom activities by signing their thoughts, questions, and answers instantly in a direct exchange between themselves, their peers, and their instructors.”*

*“Programs that focus on teaching students all the same things that other schools do, only in ASL and including Deaf culture and the Deaf community. This will provide a positive experience to both students and their families inasmuch as it will help create well-rounded, skilled, and healthy students who can fully participate in their world.”*

**d) More ASL Classes for Parents and Communities**

A related theme was the desire for more ASL classes to be offered to parents and communities.

*“Robarts should consider providing programs that encourage families to learn sign language and spend time with their Deaf children. Their families play a big role - my family all learned sign language and I believe this contributed 50% towards my success, the other 50% was Robarts.”*

*“More ASL classes for parents and the community would be beneficial. With more ASL classes for all, language will not become a barrier in the communities.”*

*“At one time in the past, schools for the Deaf provided free ASL instruction for family members - I would recommend that this be offered once again as lack of communication at home is a serious problem often leading to mental health issues for children and youth and affecting the attachment between children and their caregivers.”*

*“I think it would be great if there were programs for their families and friends to learn sign language as well so that family bonds will be strengthened and they can help their children through homework and growing up and the world around them.”*



**e) Early Acquisition of Sign Language is Crucial for Long-Term Development**

In a similar vein, a number of participants raised the importance of early childhood learning of sign language.

*“A strong preschool teaching program that would allow Deaf children to access language at the earliest age possible.”*

*“Early language acquisition is crucial through ASL and this is not accomplished with intensive speech therapy and cochlear implants.”*

**f) Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Need a Sense of Community/Deaf Schools are Centres of the Deaf Community**

Online participants underscored the importance of Deaf culture and community.

*“There needs to be a sense of community for the student who is Deaf. School boards need to be ready to assist in building that; sign language course for peers (hearing) in the school. Deaf individuals in the Deaf community could be supportive - programs or presentations could be arranged where students (and their family) could meet with, or have access to, individuals in the local Deaf community.”*

*“A dynamic and thriving Deaf school in families’ region that are fully committed to the whole child approach by including community, families and other stakeholders in all decision making. Deaf peers and involvement in Deaf community is so important to Deaf individuals’ well being. So many of us suffer from mental health issues because we are forced to navigate through the hearing system.”*

*“Robarts School for the Deaf is a public asset for Deaf children to be educated, free of bias, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and intolerance. Robarts School for the Deaf does not isolate Deaf children - it works hard, values and celebrates them.”*

*“Schools for the Deaf have historically been seen as one of the centres of the Deaf community – therefore, I would recommend on top of a strong education that extracurricular activities for students and parents be provided.”*

**g) Continue Home School Visitation Program**

A variety of online respondents cited the home school visitation program.

*“Continue to offer the Provincial Home Schools Visiting Program for hard of hearing children - this has been so very beneficial for my child!”*

*“I am very satisfied with the preschool home visiting program. It is preparing us as parents and my son for an excellent education at Robarts. Starting off right. We are being educated and informed of the Deaf community which is important for our son’s self-identity and growth.”*

*“I have heard the lament about how the Home Visiting program stops once students enter school, but parents still feel a need to be supported. There seems to be a servicing gap experienced by families once students have moved into school.”*

**h) Parents of Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Need to be Better Educated on what they should Expect from School Systems**

There was a feeling among some online participants that parents of Deaf or hard of hearing children need to better understand their educational choices and options for their children.

*“Parents need to be educated and informed on what services can and will be provided for their Deaf child if enrolling in the public or Catholic school system.”*





**i) Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Regular Schools Need Access to Itinerant Teachers**

One participant noted that if students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are in regular schools, they need access to appropriate resources.

*“The Deaf child should have access to an itinerant teacher of the Deaf or hard of hearing who in turn would provide support (educational support, emotional support, fm system support advocacy etc). Itinerants would educate and promote awareness at the schools/classrooms on hearing loss and how it impacts their learning. Itinerants work along with the classroom teachers and provide consultations pertaining to the curriculum, beneficial teaching strategies and so forth. Itinerants provide community support and promote awareness of community events for the deaf.”*

**j) There is a Lack of Consistency Across School Boards in their Capacities to Deliver Programs and Services for Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing**

One participant believed that school boards are not uniform in their capabilities to provide educational services to students who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

*“There is no consistency -- many boards across the province are changing their service delivery. Some itinerants are servicing schools on a consult basis, some still provide direct one-on-one resource support. More Interpreters will need to be available. Some boards have no problem acquiring the support of ASL Interpreters and some boards cannot provide interpreter support due to availability of certified interpreters in their area. Students require two interpreters to team interpret throughout the school day (this is not generally provided but it should be what is typically offered).”*

**k) Providing Resources to Help Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing Move into the Working World**

There were a number of comments that more resources needed to be offered to assist students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to adjust to work life.

*“Enhanced resource-services supports for children past graduation. California offers resource supports to age 25 to support Deaf and Hard of Hearing learners have a successful transition to college, university or the workplace. This program has significantly reduced the number of Deaf adults collecting welfare.”*

*“Job training programs and other programs that involve Robarts students in the community.”*

*“Co-op/work placement/job shadowing opportunities.”*

*“Co-op programs for students in order to gain more job ready skills in a variety of settings within their community.”*

**l) Provincial Schools for the Deaf should Offer Short-Term Placement / Workshops for all Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing who Attend any School**

There were a few who suggested that short-term placement or workshops should be offered to students who are Deaf or hard of hearing in mainstream schools.

*“Short term placements: Equity in this area is necessary for Deaf and Hard of Hearing learners to support cultural and linguistic awareness as well as to support the social emotional learning of all Deaf and Hard of hearing students across the province.”*

*“Our Deaf schools currently do not offer special workshops for Deaf students in Ontario who are not enrolled at PSB schools. I think PSB should offer special workshops a few times a year for Deaf students to be able to register for and come to Robarts (and/or other PSB schools), and undertake training and education - such as: one or two weeks focusing on ASL skills development; one or two weeks focusing on networking and resources; one or two weeks focusing on how to book an interpreter, where to go and*



*buy devices such as TTYs at CHS; one or two weeks social programs to interact with other Deaf students from other schools.”*

**m) There has been Tremendous Change in how Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing are Educated. There is No "one-size-fits all" Solution**

With over 25 years of experience, one participant provided a nuanced perspective about Deaf or hard of hearing education in southern Ontario.

- Declining enrolment is due to better medical practices at birth and improved technology in the classroom.
- Some students who are Deaf or hard of hearing are very successful, both academically and socially, in regular schools.
- Some students who are Deaf or hard of hearing who struggle in regular schools would have struggled in the Deaf school due to personality considerations.
- Some students need to reside at home –being away is too stressful.
- The Deaf or hard of hearing community is diverse with diverse needs.
- Some older people who are Deaf or hard of hearing have out-of-date views about regular schools.
- Some regular schools are very successful in integrating students who are Deaf or hard of hearing. For example, hearing students learn a signed language.
- However, regular schools should be offering ASL to students who are Deaf or hard of hearing as well as the oral language.

*“I have worked with Deaf students both at Robarts and in the mainstream high school adjacent to Robarts for more than 25 years and have seen many successful models within and outside of Robarts. If I had to answer this question 25 years ago, I would have answered differently as there weren't a lot of options outside of the provincial schools back then. We had a large student population, a wide range of courses and programs to meet their needs and also a large student population which allowed for a variety of socialization options. We could also communicate with them using sign language. Many of these children grew up in residence with other students who would become closer to them than their siblings and staff that knew them better than their parents. Many developed lifelong friendships, for both staff and students. Over the years, there have been fewer deaf children being born (after realizing that too much oxygen at birth caused deafness, blindness or both), and new technologies abound (better hearing aids, free field systems in the classrooms, open captioning, cochlear implants etc.). Many mainstreamed students can now use note takers along with interpreters (or educational assistants that are fluent in sign language), so parents don't have to send a child away to a provincial school for their education. Although we tried to make it like a home away from home, I can't imagine how the parents must have felt, although it was often the place of choice for the students, mainly because they had staff here that could communicate. I still remember one young boy though, who always returned home on the weekends to the couch, because his bedroom was given up to a step-brother who was there for the full week. That little guy would have done anything to be able to be home with his family! As each family is different, and the needs of our students diverse, I don't think there's a "one-size-fits-all" solution. I know there are several people who are adamant about mainstreaming children into the local schools, but many of those with opinions, both deaf and hearing, haven't been into a mainstream program for years, if at all, and haven't seen the success stories. I know many of the Deaf people are comparing their mainstream experiences from decades ago, but there really is no comparison! Yes, I know of some students who weren't successful, for a variety of reasons, but some of those very students weren't successful in the provincial school either. Some didn't thrive because they were very introverted, while others were a bit shy/nervous at the beginning but later started to develop relationships, and confidence and ended up being quite successful. I had some students who developed close relationships with their hearing peers, while teaching staff and students about their Deaf culture, and were totally accepted in that environment, so much so that I often have former teachers asking when they're going to get another Deaf student. It was a win/win for everyone. Some taught sign language classes/clubs, others were elected to student council, some joined athletic*



*teams and attended extracurricular games and events, sometimes with or without an interpreter. Some even won the subject award for highest marks/achievement. Some were able to take advantage of co-op placements in the mainstream programs and ended up finding employment in that same field upon graduation. I see the need for a variety of options for parents/students. For those still wanting to have their child attend a school for the Deaf, they have that option. Some parents don't want to have their child live in residence so may chose to move closer to the school. There could be the option of having a self-contained program (similar to years back) for the Deaf, within a local school, where there was a teacher(s) of the Deaf and other support staff that are fluent in ASL. I believe there is a similar program offered now but I don't believe there's an ASL component. I think it's an oral program. For some of our students, I can see them being capable of success in a local school board, with an interpreter and other supports as necessary. If possible, it would be nice if some of their former staff members could also be involved in their new educational program, for consistency or continuity, but also reduce the time it will take for new staff to get to know the students and their abilities. Again, I feel that parents and even other staff, if at a mainstream school, should have the option of taking ASL classes, at a reasonable cost, in order to have the lines of communication open at all levels and allow the student the nurturing and support that they need to become all that they can be."*