

SPEAKING NOTES
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Let me get straight to the point: if you are a student with autism or any “special need,” if you’re the parent of child with a disability, or a teacher trying to help one, then you already know that the **current special education system is in crisis**. The writing has been on the wall for many years now, but for the last three in particular, education stakeholders have been sounding the alarm.

In 2014, People for Education released a [report](#) on Special Education, highlighting issues like the school exclusion. My friend Tara is here today with her son, who’s been excluded from school for a year now.

In 2016, the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, released a [report](#) which included details on the experiences of youth with disabilities at school. We’re honoured that Irwin Elman has joined us here today and that he’s making himself available for comment after this news conference.

In April of this year, we released our own report called “[New Horizons](#),” detailing our recommendations on how to

improve outcomes for students with autism.

The [report](#) by the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario released in August highlighted the negative impact of the Liberal government's decision to shift the special education funding model from one based on student need to one based on a "statistical prediction model."

So, is it an exaggeration, to use the word crisis? I don't think so. We see evidence of this crisis every day:

- when students with disabilities are denied the specialized equipment that would help them communicate and learn;
- when the parents of Jack Skrt, a grade 3 student with autism, have to fight all the way to the [Ontario Human Rights Tribunal](#) in order to access scientifically valid ABA in the classroom for their son;
- I think it's a crisis when students with disabilities wander off of school property due to a lack of appropriate staffing and supervision; and
- I *know* it's a crisis when I regularly hear about parents who are so fed up with fighting the school system that they resort to homeschooling or sending their children to private school;
- And I think it's a crisis when policies vary so widely that one child in one school board is told he can't

bring his [autism service dog](#) to school but another child in a different board can. You can ask Kenner Fee about that--we're honoured that he's with us here today and that he'll be raising his voice later at our rally.

We also know it's a crisis because we've heard so much lately about teachers and education workers being injured on the job. Today, the OAC wants to thank those who have managed to describe the problem *without blaming the children*. That's crucial. We know that yes, when our children's needs aren't being met, they sometimes lash out at school.

But we also want to say clearly that as parents, we are on the other side of that same coin. Because sometimes, our kids lash out at us, and we get hurt, too. We have bruises and bite marks and holes in our walls. And sometimes, our kids get hurt at school, too. That needs acknowledgment. It's complicated. And most of all, it's hard for our kids. Blaming teachers, education workers, children, or parents gets us nowhere. What we need is to come together; to say that there are 333,000 students with special needs in Ontario and we have to do better.

Over the last two months, we've conducted a survey of our OAC members and I'm pleased today to release some

interim results from that survey. What I'm going to do now is share some of that data with you while asking some pointed questions directed to the Minister of Education, Mitzie Hunter.

- 63% of our respondents felt that their child's teacher did not know enough about autism to effectively support their child's learning, and only 46% of parents felt the same way about their child's EA's. How will the Minister address this?
- If special education is an area that she is "focussed on" as she told the [Star](#) in 2016, then why is it that 72% of our respondents felt that their child does not receive the level of support that they need at school?
- 57% of our respondents indicated that they had been told by a professional that their child *required* one-to-one support in the classroom. Despite this, only 17% of respondents said their child got it. If the Liberals have thrown so much money into education, why is that funding still not reaching front line support workers?
- If the Liberals believe so strongly in "[inclusive education](#)," then what does the Minister have to say to the 26% of our respondents who indicated they were

asked to keep their child home during a field trip because the school could not provide the proper supports? Or to the 16% of parents who indicated that their child had been placed in a room such as a closet, storage room, office or a washroom in order to “keep them safe?”

- Speaking of student safety, what will the Minister do to reduce this number? 29% of our respondents indicated their child had been handled or restrained by school staff in the past year, with 14% indicating that their child had sustained injuries due to these actions. And just 27% of parents felt that their child was safe at school all of the time, and 11% of parents felt that their child was “hardly ever” safe at school.

In response to this data, and in response to the crisis it reflects, we’re protesting outside later this morning to call on the government to take action *now--before* the next election. So, you may ask...what do we want?

- We want more special education training for educators and support staff.
- We want to more Education Assistants in the classroom.
- We want to see the use of meaningful, scientifically valid (ABA) in classrooms--for autistic students it’s

necessary, but it's helpful for a wide range of learners.

- We want more accountability for special education funding dollars.
- And lastly, we want the government to establish a provincial policy permitting qualified autism service dogs in schools

We also want to have a **positive discussion** about the *opportunities* presented by having classrooms that are open to those with different types of minds. I can tell you that becoming a mother to two children with autism was the best thing to ever happen to me as a teacher. When I take time to see the world through their eyes, and through the eyes of the disabled students I've met in my classroom, everything looks brand new. The perspective is so different, so unique, that it's called into question everything I thought I knew about how to explain simple concepts. Autistic students are extraordinary teachers--if only we have the time and the resources to listen.

I know that during the next election, we'll all be listening very carefully to the three provincial parties as they lay out their plans on how to better meet the needs of students with disabilities.

And whoever wins, we'll be here, ready to hold them to account. Because autism doesn't end at 5, and it doesn't end at school, either.

And now, I'll ask Bruce to introduce David Lepofsky, my mentor and friend.