



Physicians of Ontario Neurodevelopmental Advocacy

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For The Parents Consultation Open Letter

To the Honourable Lisa Thompson, Minister of Education;

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into how the public education system in Ontario can be improved. Our society is rapidly changing, and it is important that our children receive the best possible education in order to be prepared for tomorrow. We also need to be fiscally responsible, and prevention is more cost effective than treatment.

The most important part of a good education is the ability to read fluently with excellent comprehension. Although Ontario has performed well in national and international measures of reading success (**PISA**, **PCAP**), there is still a significant number of students who are not reading at the expected level. Reading ability is an important factor in predicting future success. Individuals who do not learn to read well have a higher rate of physical and mental disorders, have an increased chance of being abused, and are more likely to struggle with unemployment and incarceration. **Although the Ministry of Education has made many excellent strides towards helping children who struggle to learn to read, there remain significant gaps in our system that prevent success for all, with the fact that not all schools use evidence based strategies to teach children how to read.**

Research into how children learn to read has been clear; a structured, systematic, explicit, phonics based approach is most effective. Although all children benefit from a strong phonics based teaching strategy, 60% of the population require this in order to learn to read successfully, and 10 to 15% require systematic instruction with many repetitions. Ontario has a good policy on requiring schools to implement a tiered approach to reading instruction (ppm 8), but sadly it is not implemented consistently in all school boards. Balanced reading is still emphasized in many school boards with programs like Reading Recovery, which teaches guessing rather than a phonics approach. Research has been conducted in Ontario demonstrating the benefits of early (Grade one) direct instruction with a phonics approach and metacognitive strategies to help the 10 to 15% of children at risk for learning disabilities including Dyslexia. With early screening using

free and simple tools, children at risk can be identified easily. They can then accelerate their reading gains, regardless of socioeconomic status or IQ (Empower Reading). In fact, the Ontario government has supported research showing the benefits of Empower as a tier two and three intervention. **The reality is that not all schools use such evidence based strategies and their students are therefore penalized compared to their peers. This sets them up for failure in school and in life.**

There is a strong emphasis on STEM subjects currently since EQAO testing has shown less satisfactory results in math achievement. My concern is that all children need a solid foundation in reading instruction in order to benefit from instruction in other subjects as they get further along in school. Much of math is understood in word problems. Reading is necessary to understand textbooks on science. We need to continue to focus on reading while also addressing STEM.

As you look to improve the education system in Ontario, **we strongly suggest you incentivize schools to implement evidence based reading instruction, and direct them to report on the funding spent on remediating reading disability, the number of students receiving it, and the average improvement after a year of intervention** PPM 8 has not been sufficient in ensuring all schools offer evidence based tiered intervention for learning disabilities, including Dyslexia. Programs like Empower or SRA Corrective Reading should be made available in every school so that children who struggle with the essential life skill of reading can have an equitable chance at success in tomorrow's economy. Not only will this be a good investment in our children, but **it will save money in the school system by avoiding the need for ongoing special education supports and mental health services for students who cannot read adequately.**

Sincerely,

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