

## **Bias Against School Inclusion in Toronto Star Reporting, 2019**

*This is a section of a larger paper where we examined the Toronto Star's coverage<sup>1</sup> of the Ontario Government's autism funding decisions between January 1, 2019 and August 28, 2019 around the autism policy funding package known as the Ontario Autism Program (OAP). You can read the full paper at: [autisticmediawatchcanada.com](http://autisticmediawatchcanada.com)*

### **Summary**

In its coverage of school inclusion in 2019, the *Toronto Star* perpetuated the myth that inclusion of disabled children at school is a “burden”.

The *Star* did not, in any of its coverage, ever present the positive aspects of school inclusion.

The *Star* never interviewed any school inclusion experts.

The *Star* never talked to disabled people about school inclusion.

### **The story-- and how it was covered**

Under the new Ontario Autism Program, about 1,000 JK and SK students who had been segregated in behaviour facilities were set to enter public school beginning in the fall of 2019.

The *Star* repeatedly referred to these newly-mainstreamed autistic children (**less than one child per school**) as an “[influx](#)”, creating stigma around mainstreamed children and never even defining the term. In its coverage, the *Star* used the following terms:

- “the [imminent influx](#) of students with autism”
- “[downloading](#) kids’ behavioural therapy needs onto Ontario schools”
- “an [untenable](#) situation”
- “the [consequences](#) of kids in therapy coming into classrooms”
- “an [unsustainable burden](#) on schools”

Terms the *Star* **didn’t** use to describe including less than one new autistic child per school in Ontario include:

- “equitable”
- “inclusion”
- “mainstreaming”
- “equality”
- “welcoming”

*Star* journalist Laurie Monsebraaten wrote: “Educators are predicting [chaos in the classroom](#) as children with autism enter the school system.” This commentary (disguised as news) distills the *Star’s* entire approach to the matter of disability inclusion in schools during the period studied.

<sup>1</sup> We focused on autism policy news articles, excluding the *Star’s* other autism coverage (about scientific research at the children’s hospital, for example), to stay focused on the policy discussion. We reviewed 39 news articles, 2 OpEds written by the *Star* and 1 *Toronto Star* OpEd from a lobby leader.

The *Star* consistently presented school inclusion as a “crisis” and never referred to inclusion and mainstreaming in positive terms. They never spoke to any inclusion experts or even anyone who was in favour of inclusion.

The absence of any voices of inclusion set the tone for a bias that influenced readers’ perceptions about school inclusion, mainstreaming and disabled children.

While **the number of mainstreamed autistic children was less than one per classroom**, the *Star* promoted a panic about autistic inclusion by referring to it as an [“influx”](#) and a “burden” to teachers. The term *influx* was the *Star*’s shorthand; used in nearly every [article](#) that discussed the inclusions.

### **Background: Segregation in Ontario schools**

Ontario schools are not inclusive of autistic/intellectually & developmentally disabled students—a fact that the *Toronto Star* did not address in any of its coverage of the mainstreaming of 1,000 autistic students into the system in the fall of 2019.

- A [Report](#) by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in 2019 found that special education in our province has not meaningfully changed in 40 years<sup>2</sup>.
- A [Report](#) by Arch Disability Law found that “25% of parents [of disabled students] surveyed reported that they had simply been told not to bring their child to school. Of these, 76% reported that informal exclusions were communicated to parents verbally, rather than in writing, and 41% reported that the rationale for the exclusion was not clearly stated.”
- Ontario’s Ministry of Education also [reported](#) high levels of suspensions for students who have a disability generally, with approximately 47% of all suspensions and 48% of all expulsions involving a student who has a disability in 2015-2016.
- People for Education [found](#) in 2017 that over the previous 10 years there has been an increase in the number of students tracked into special education, at a time when other provinces are decreasing or [eliminating](#) segregated classrooms altogether<sup>3</sup>.

### **How much is an “influx”?**

Under the new OAP, about 1,000 JK and SK students who had been segregated in behaviour facilities were set to enter public school beginning in the fall of 2019.

Here, the numbers are very important. The number of autistic students expected to be newly mainstreamed in the province in the fall of 2019 was [1,105](#) and the number of students to be newly mainstreamed in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) was 250.

<sup>2</sup> From page 38 of the [Report](#): “Ontario’s current approach to ‘special education’ is premised on exclusion. It labels students with disabilities as ‘exceptions’ before meeting their needs. ... Ontario’s special education system is nearly 40 years old and its core premise around “exceptionalities” stands in direct contrast to progressive shifts in society and law that embrace inclusion and universal design. It’s time we rethink how we can truly support and include all children.”

<sup>3</sup> See Sec 6.2.2 of New Brunswick’s [Policy 322](#), signed into law in 2013. (Department of Education & Early Childhood Development.)

Toronto has 451 elementary schools, making the average number of new autistic students **less than one student per classroom** or approximately 5/8 of a Kindergartener<sup>4</sup>.

The Star presented the inclusion [this way](#):

- “School boards are expecting an influx of about 1,000 students with autism into schools”.
- A TDSB Chair, speaking to the *Star*, [described it](#) as: "This strategy [sic] puts strain on our schools and staff."
- An ONTABA [statement](#) described inclusion as “downloading specialized interventions onto teachers and EAs”.
- Various school board representatives interviewed by the *Star* used the following terms to describe including less than one autistic child per school in Ontario this year:
  - “the [imminent influx](#) of students with autism”
  - “[downloading](#) kids’ behavioural therapy needs onto Ontario schools”
  - “an [untenable](#) situation”
  - “the [consequences](#) of kids in therapy coming into classrooms”
  - “an [unsustainable burden](#) on schools”
  - “Educators are predicting [chaos in the classroom](#) as children with autism enter the school system”

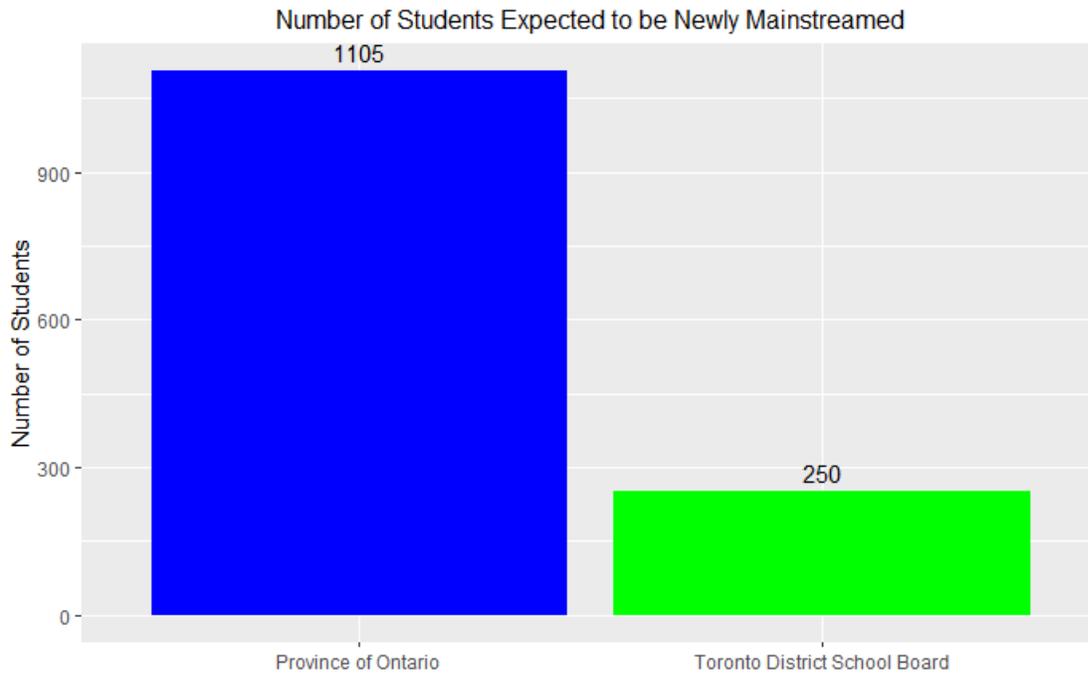
Terms the *Star* **didn’t** use to describe including less than one new autistic child per school in Ontario include:

- “equitable”
- “inclusion”
- “mainstreaming”
- desegregation
- “access”
- “equality”
- “welcoming”

**[please see next page]**

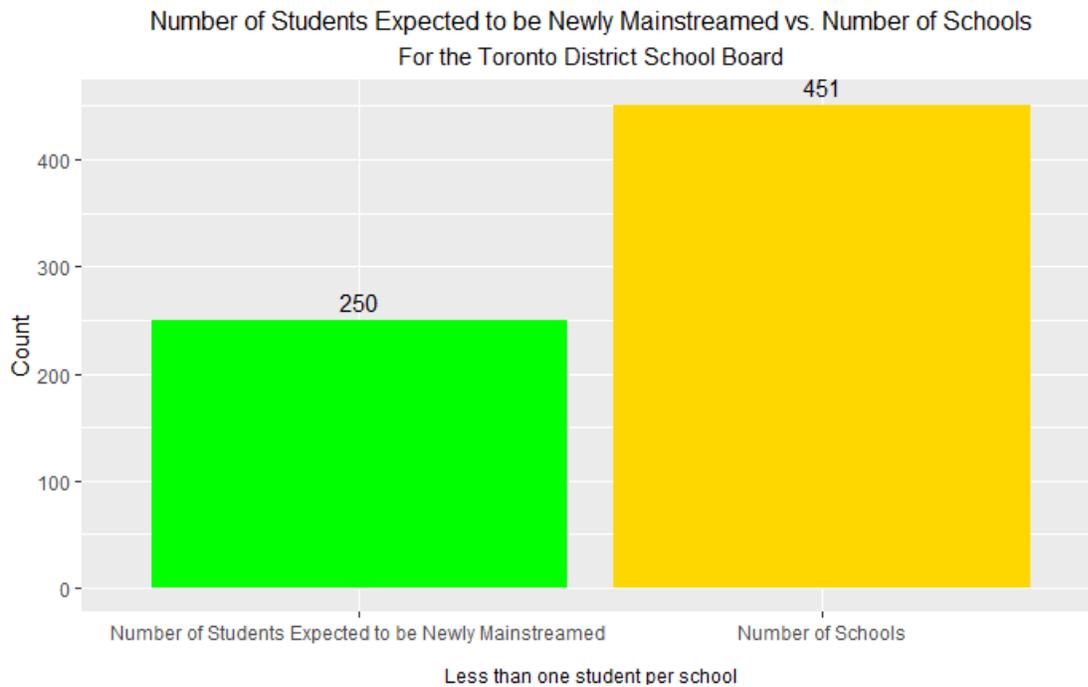
<sup>4</sup> Rounding up so we aren’t accused of “exaggerating” the number. The actual number is 4.4345898/8. Rounding down would be 4/8, or half.

**Data in graphic form**



Number of students expected to be newly mainstreamed in the province: 1,105  
Number of students to be newly mainstreamed in the Toronto District School Board: 250

**Figure 15**

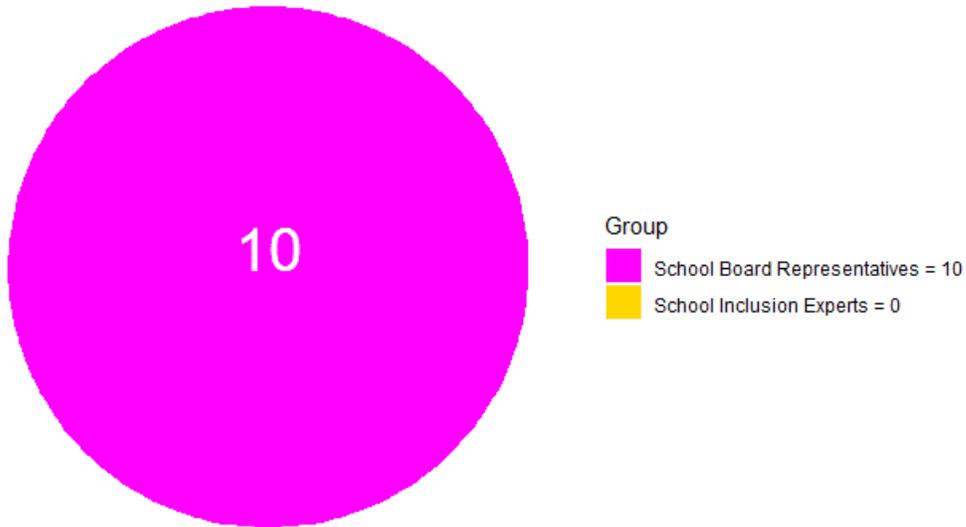


Number of students to be newly mainstreamed in the Toronto District School Board: 250

Number of elementary schools in Ontario: 451

### Figure 16

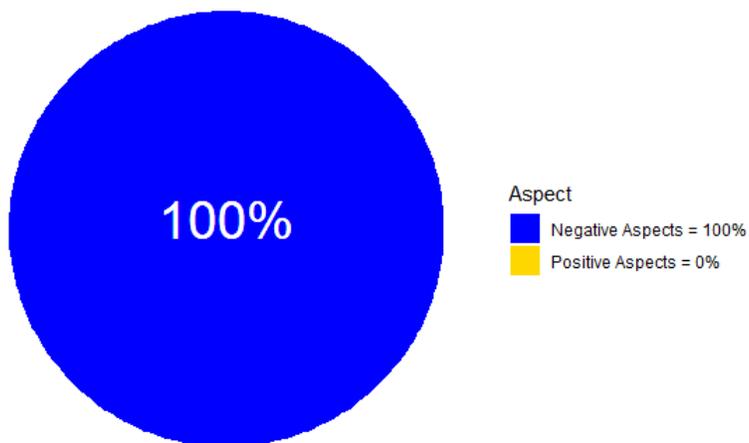
Number of Quotes about School Inclsion by...



Times school inclusion experts quoted on inclusion: 0  
Times school board representatives were quoted on inclusion: 10

### Figure 17

Articles Mentioning School Inclusion that Discuss...



Note: 10% of Total Articles on Autism Policy Mentioned School Inclusion

Percent of articles where positive aspects of school inclusion discussed: 0%

Percent where alleged negative impact, e.g. “autistic influx” discussed: 100%

### **Analysis: Panic sells papers**

The *Star*'s coverage of school inclusion is simple and formulaic: create a drama: draw readers in. When readers might be more likely to read, click, buy, if they see the headline:

“INFLUX!”

If the *Star*'s story about desegregation of autistic students had been nuanced—by discussing the dramatic difference in life chances for children in special education versus children in mainstream classrooms, for example—it would have involved a different headline:

“CHILDREN INCLUDED AT SCHOOL”

Imagine now how autistic people, parents of autistic children, educators and the public would receive this kind of headline, and integrate that (real) story into their lives.

Autistic children are not an “influx”. They deserve access to an equal education. Cultural panic about autism and other disabilities is an old story, and perpetuating it at the expense of children is not ethical or balanced news reporting.

We hope you will share this and read our full report (above). Thanks for reading.

**Note on Methodology:** We chose the *Toronto Star* in part because it is Canada's [highest-circulation newspaper](#) on overall weekly circulation, with about 300,000 readers. It also represents the Canadian province/territory with the largest population (Ontario), which is also the seat of Canada's federal government. We looked at 39 news articles written between January and August of 2019, as well as 2 editorials by the *Star* and 1 commentary by a pro-ABA lobbyist (for a total of 42).