



Special Education Advisory Committee Meeting
Wednesday, September 9, 2026
MINUTES

The Special Education Advisory Committee of the Upper Grand District School Board met on Wednesday, September 9, 2026 at 7:03 p.m. in a hybrid meeting in the Boardroom at the Guelph Board Office.

Members Present: Laurie Whyte, Chair; Trustee; Denise Helm, Canadian Mental Health Association; Melissa Williamson, Community Member-at-Large; Jennifer Tremaine, Easter Seals Ontario; Maren Vsetula, FASD Ontario; Melody Dekorte, Inclusion Action in Ontario (IAO); Mandi McCreary, Kerry's Place Autism Services; Tina MacPherson, Autism Ontario (Alternate); Shelley Marks, OPVIC (Ontario Parents for Visually Impaired Children); Ted Fransen, Waterloo Wellington Down Syndrome Society

Staff Present: Wendy Donaldson, Superintendent of Student Achievement; Dianna Secord, Principal of Special Education; Alicia Ralph, Human Rights, Equity & Accessibility Commissioner; Catherine Borland-Kerr, Manager, Mental Health & Addictions; Josh Boden, Manager, Psychology and BA; Kristen Smith, Manager, Communication, Language & Speech Services; Brent Bloch, Secondary Principal; Rochelle Murray-Cako, Elementary Principal; Adam Leader, Nisha Patmanathan, Melissa Mitchell, Special Education Consultants

Absent: Andrea Wyshniowsky, Dufferin Child & Family Services (regrets); John McNamara, Learning Disabilities Association of Wellington County; Alethia O'Hare-Stephenson, Trustee

Call to Order

Laurie Whyte, Chair, called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

Land Acknowledgement and Anti-Racism Statement

Kristen Smith, Manager, Communication, Language & Speech Services, read the land acknowledgment statement and Dianna Secord, Principal of Special Education, read the Human Rights and Action statement.

Approval of Agenda of September 9, 2026

Moved by: Ted Fransen

Carried

Approval of the Minutes of June 10, 2026

Moved by: Melody Dekorte

Carried

Action Items

Wendy Donaldson provided the following updates:

- LRC 8 & LRC 16 – Data from research and community input including next steps and recommendations around LRC 8 & 16 to be shared with SEAC
- Review current systems and supports in place for students with FASD in partnership with DCAFS as well as Level 1 ASD – Dianna Secord has been working with FASD leads within the board and the next step in the Plan will be shared in October. This includes consultation with community partners in those lead positions before we work to develop a plan to support our students with FASD work consistently across the board.
- Educational Assistants next steps – Best Practices document presentation in November
- Parent Portal – Mark Howe to update CLEVR with feedback from SEAC
- Student Transportation Services Presentation – Dianna Secord to bring special education busing feedback and proposed next steps back to SEAC for discussion at next meeting
- Mentally Healthy Return to Schools - Bring the new Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy, including related next steps, back to SEAC for further review.

CEO Peter Sovran's Message

Laurie Whyte welcomed Peter Sovran, CEO, who is retiring at the end of September.

Peter Sovran expressed his gratitude and thanks to the members of SEAC, the Chair, UGDSB staff and community members for their work in supporting students. He added that SEAC is not only a legislative committee, but one with heart and passion because everyone has a real interest in ensuring that students who require additional support are always seen and heard and appropriate action is taken. He wished everyone much success for the school year.

Laurie Whyte, on behalf of SEAC, acknowledged CEO Sovran's retirement, and the years of leadership and the commitment to listening to the voices of students, families and the organizations that support them. She wished him well.

FASD International Day Introduction & Video

Marian Vsetula, SEAC member and mother of two FASD boys, explained that Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a lifelong disability often caused by prenatal alcohol exposure. It affects both the brain and the body and often it's invisible. Current research suggests that at least 4% of the Canadian population or one in every 25 people have FASD.

FASD remains significantly underdiagnosed because it's characteristics can resemble ADHD, autism, learning disabilities, trauma or mental health concerns. Without an accurate understanding of a student's needs, adults may use strategies that are not effective or expect skills that the student cannot yet demonstrate consistently.

For students, FASD affects memory, attention, communication, planning, impulse control, sensory processing and emotional regulation. It is important to understand there is no safe time to consume alcohol during pregnancy or when planning a pregnancy.

The Red Shoes movement began in 2013 with Canadian advocate R.J. Formanek, who lives with FASD. He wore red shoes to stand out, start conversations and make an invisible disability more visible.

Every student with FASD is different, but with understanding, appropriate expectations and the right supports, students with FASD can learn, contribute and succeed.

FASD video was shared with SEAC. Laurie Whyte noted that September 9th is International FASD Awareness Day.

Open Forum – Best Practice and Good News

No updates

Policy Review Update

No policies currently out for public consultation.

Human Rights @ UGDSB

Alicia Ralph, Human Rights, Equity & Accessibility Commissioner, introduced Shannon Weir, the new Black Student Success Coordinator, explaining that her role will support students and families, assist schools, identify systemic patterns, and add an intersectional lens to special education without replacing existing services.

The role operates across three levels: At the family level, it supports navigation, engagement, and trust; at the school level, it provides consultation, problem-solving, and staff learning; and at the system level, it identifies patterns, examines data and barriers, and formulates recommendations. Shannon Weir noted that teachers had already begun reaching out with ideas and that they were looking forward to engaging with students and schools.

Alicia Ralph emphasized that Shannon is not expected to solve every issue affecting Black students independently. If several students encounter the same barrier, the response should move beyond individual support to examining why the barrier is recurring and what organizational changes are needed. The goal is to remove barriers rather than make students better at navigating them.

She asked SEAC to consider whether identification accurately reflects student needs; whether disability-related behaviour is being interpreted through racial assumptions; whether students have equitable access to inclusion and programming; whether families understand and feel heard in processes; and whether transitions, course selection, and post-secondary pathways preserve opportunities.

SEAC was asked how would we monitor where Black student success and special education intersect; what meaningful family engagement looks like; how the role's impact should be measured beyond participation numbers; and what unintended barriers might emerge.

Laurie Whyte suggested that members send their feedback by email due to time restraint.

IEP Consultation

Mark Howe, K-12 + CLEVR Lead Consultant, demonstrated revisions to the digital IEP consultation form. He narrowed the form so it is easier to use on mobile devices and revised the wording to reduce specialized educational terminology. The form continues to support the required confirmation that parents or guardians received a digital IEP and were consulted in its development.

Parents or guardians can open and print the IEP through the portal, complete the consultation form, add comments, and send the form to the school team. Once submitted, the form is locked; additional feedback requires restarting the form. While an IEP is being edited by teachers and reviewed by principals, it is temporarily unavailable through the portal, and families needing a copy during that period should contact the school.

A new optional Step 3 allows parents or guardians to provide comments for individual IEP sections, including general information and the reason for the IEP, assessments, strengths and needs, accommodations, programs and courses, resources, specialized equipment, and the transition plan. Text boxes can expand as needed and support up to approximately 4,000 characters. The optional designation is intended to avoid making detailed comments feel mandatory.

A member of SEAC suggested making the Step 3 description more explicit for families unfamiliar with IEPs by stating that the listed items are sections of the IEP where comments may be added. Mark Howe agreed to revise the wording and potentially share a screenshot for review. He'll update the parent instructions for October, incorporate any additional

feedback, and reflect changes to the CLEVR landing page, which has also been redesigned to be more intuitive and mobile-friendly.

Research Update

Joshua Boden, Manager, Psychological & Services, provided an overview of the first phase of a research review examining the effectiveness of UGDSB's LRC 8 and LRC 16 specialized class programs. The review aims to determine whether current programming aligns with evidence-based practices and to identify opportunities for improving student outcomes.

The Board engaged a researcher in literacy and special education from OISE at the University of Toronto. The primary goal was to identify high-impact practices, policies, assessment protocols, instructional approaches, and resource allocations that maximize student achievement.

A significant finding from the research is that intervention should ideally be driven by student need rather than solely by diagnosis or formal identification requirements. While ministry guidelines often require formal identification for placement, evidence suggests that earlier screening and needs-based intervention can improve outcomes and reduce delays in support.

Next steps include additional stakeholder consultation and feedback to inform future recommendations regarding the structure and delivery of LRC 8 and LRC 16 programming.

Blayne Primeau, Senior Manager – Research, Evidence & Innovation Department, noted that as part of the review of UGDSB's LRC 8 and LRC 16 specialized class placements, stakeholder consultations were conducted to gather feedback from students, parents/guardians, and educators regarding their experiences with these programs.

Parents and teachers often discussed the effectiveness of targeted reading interventions and raised questions about how gains can be maintained after students leave the program. Reintegration into regular classroom settings and continuity of support were recurring themes. In contrast, feedback regarding LRC 16 placements focused more heavily on long-term support needs, independence, and transitions to secondary school. Parents and teachers expressed the importance of maintaining appropriate supports as students progressed through the system and raised concerns about the availability of specialized programming beyond elementary school. Despite these differences, both programs were viewed as highly valuable.

Stakeholders consistently described individualized support, small class environments, and strong relationships with staff as key elements of success. Looking ahead, the findings suggest that the future discussions may benefit from focusing on things like transition planning, continuity of support, equitable access to programming, and preserving the

instructional and relational features that stakeholders identified as most important to student success.

Following presentations from Josh Boden and Blayne Primeau, committee members and stakeholders were invited to provide feedback on the research findings, program review, and consultation results related to the LRC 8 and LRC 16 specialized class placements.

To gather input, participants were directed to a Thought Exchange platform accessible through a QR code, direct web link, or mobile device and encouraged to share their thoughts in real time, with responses populating the feedback platform as they were submitted. The collected input will help inform the next phase of the review and support the development of future recommendations regarding specialized class programming within the Upper Grand District School Board.

Transportation: Supporting students with Special Education Needs

Dianna Secord, Principal of Special Education, explained that transportation planning is based on each student's strengths, needs, and strategies.

School teams work collaboratively with Special Education Consultants to develop individualized transportation plans that address the unique needs of students. Consultants also support school teams in identifying and sharing a range of strategies with families. These strategies could include, but are not limited to, visual supports, social narratives, gradual familiarization with transportation routines, and individualized planning. Through proactive collaboration and ongoing communication among schools, families, and transportation partners, these strategies can help support safe, predictable, and successful transportation experiences for students.

The first-time rider and refresher program is available to any student who would benefit from additional preparation, including kindergarten students and students who have previously ridden the bus.

Drivers assigned to wheelchair-accessible buses receive specialized training. Additional training is provided for drivers transporting students who use approved safety vests, and drivers receive student-specific instructions relevant to their routes. The transportation consortium works with providers to ensure required training and information are available.

SEAC noted that transportation needs may change throughout the year and require regular review. Additional supports such as practice rides, relationship-building opportunities, and customized seating plans may be necessary for some students. More consistent communication processes and standardized approaches for addressing transportation concerns may require further work.

Dianna Secord and Wendy Donaldson invited additional feedback by email and indicated that more standardized, proactive approaches may be considered.

Mentally Healthy Return to School

Catherine Borland-Kerr, Manager, Mental Health & Addictions, summarized the mental-health professional learning provided to educators for the new school year.

The back-to-school approach encourages educators to support their own well-being while creating conditions for students to feel connected, welcomed, included, grounded, and ready to learn.

Tier 1 applies to every student and is where educators promote well-being through everyday relationships, routines, and classroom practices. Tier 2 supports students needing additional assistance, with educators noticing concerns and connecting them to appropriate services. Tier 3 provides more intensive, targeted support while educators continue maintaining a caring and supportive classroom relationship.

Educators received pathways explaining how to connect with CYCs, social workers, administrators, and community partners, along with updated Wellness Works materials, First 8 Days activities, monthly themes, and School Mental Health Ontario resources.

Election Preparation

Wendy Donaldson outlined the renewal process for SEAC positions alongside the municipal election and asked organizations to submit nomination letters by November 1.

Sample letters were included in the meeting package, and all nomination letters will be collected and submitted for Board approval for the next four-year term.

Wendy Donaldson noted that SEAC currently has no members representing the Indigenous First Nations community, despite a recommendation that at least two members be included. She will work with the Manager of Communications and Public Relations on outreach to identify interested representatives. The plan is also to recruit current students and adults with lived experience of special education who may be willing to join the committee.

Trustee Report**Laurie Whyte –**

- CEO Peter Sovran is retiring at the end of September and Brent McDonald will be transitioning into the role effective October 1, 2026

Updates from Superintendent of Education

Wendy Donaldson provided information on the following:

- Welcome Back letter to Ontario students and families from Minister Calandra
- Welcome back letter to UGDSB students and families for the 2026-2027 school year from Peter Sovran and Brent McDonald
- Student and Family support office - email: studentfamilysupport@ugdsb.on.ca for additional support if concerns are not resolved at school level

Meeting Summary, Recommendation(s), Motion(s) and Action(s)

- Special education busing – discussion and feedback at next meeting
- Mental Health Strategy – information and next steps to be shared at SEAC
- LRC 8 & 16 – next steps and recommendations based on research work and feedback from community

Other

Next meeting – October 14, 2026

Adjournment:

Moved by: Melody Dekorte

That the meeting be adjourned at 9:00 pm.

Carried