

12. Think Tank on Autism



The TDSB's Think Tank on Autism (May 2006) Report of Findings

Executive Summary

Prepared for The Toronto District School Board, August 2006
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In May 2006, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) conducted a Think Tank on Autism to address issues related to the education of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in the TDSB. The purpose of the Think Tank was to bring together a cross-section of people from various stakeholder groups to gain from their collective wisdom.

The session featured representation from parents and students, parent and student advocates, the medical profession, government, universities, agencies, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and a variety of staff from the TDSB and other neighbouring boards.

The agenda was designed to raise awareness, establish collaborative networks, share best practices, improve accessibility, collaboratively problem-solve, and create positive momentum to move forward to support student success.

The report of the findings of the event summarized the discussions that took place that day, as well as the feedback of the participants about the Think Tank process itself. The greatest challenge in the reporting was that the diversity of the stakeholders participating in the Think Tank naturally resulted in a wide variety of perspectives and insights. Nevertheless, a number of themes emerged repeatedly in the feedback provided. The key themes are summarized below.

Defining Success for Students on the Autism Spectrum

Participants defined "success" for students on the autism spectrum in a variety of ways. The most prevalent were improvements in the following student outcomes:

- improved social skills and relationships with peers;
- enhanced emotional well-being (e.g., self-confidence, attitude toward school and comfort level);
- increased academic progress;
- life skills learnings (e.g., independence and communication skills); and
- improved transitions to regular schooling or to post-secondary options.

Factors Contributing to Student Success

➤ Students' Strengths:

Participants identified a multitude of the strengths of students with ASD that contributed to their success. The most prevalent of these were:

- personal characteristics such as motivation, perseverance, and a strong sense of self; and
- learning strengths such as effective communication skills (in particular, strong verbal skills),
- strong academic skills, and an ability to work cooperatively with their peers.

➤ Programs and Services:

Participants identified a variety of programs and services that they believed contributed to the success of students on the autism spectrum. The most prevalent of these were:

- holistic, child-centred programming, characterized by features such as the identification of students' individual needs and strengths, utilization of a variety of strategies and approaches, and the involvement of TDSB support services;

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- a supportive home environment in which the student's parents are actively involved and engaged as partners with the school;
- a supportive school environment that involves the direct support and involvement of teachers, EAs, resource teachers, and support services (e.g., psychologists and speech language pathologists); and
- partnerships with community agencies such as Surrey Place Centre and The Geneva Centre for Autism.

Recommendations

Participants offered a variety of valuable suggestions and recommendations for next steps, both immediate and long-term. The most predominant of these were as follows:

- Expand professional development and training opportunities for teachers, EAs, support staff, and administrators to increase awareness and understanding and to improve service delivery for all of those working with students on the autism spectrum.
- Continue the dialogue with other professionals and parents to understand autism better and to identify ways to improve program delivery and support for students with ASD.
- Employ a more coordinated, team approach to enhance program delivery in all schools by:
 - increasing the focus on the identification of each child's particular needs;
 - enhancing the in-house support available to students with ASD (e.g., EAs, occupational therapists, language pathologists, and ABA training);
 - establishing PDD/ASD teams in all four quadrants and assigning a "case manager" to coordinate program delivery within each family of schools or quadrant;
 - fostering partnerships and communication with parents; and
 - fostering partnerships/collaboration with community service providers or agencies to maximize awareness and use of the available resources.
- Provide greater support for families of students on the autism spectrum to empower them in the process of educating their child. This includes informing parents about the options available to them, providing or connecting them to outreach programs to support families, and facilitating crisis management for families.
- Promote acceptance and tolerance of diversity within the education system and within the community as a whole. Specifically, it was suggested that the TDSB and community partners take steps to "combat the stigma of ASD" and to "debunk the myths" of ASD.

The Think Tank Process

Participants in the Think Tank on Autism were given an opportunity to comment on the Think Tank process via an online feedback form. In general, respondents rated the Think Tank on Autism session as **very engaging**. The content was rated as **helpful** and **very relevant**. Finally, the format of the day was thought to be **conducive to dialogue and to the sharing of ideas**.

Respondents' comments suggested that they appreciated the opportunity to work together with the various stakeholder groups. As articulated by one of the respondents, "The session was a good example of how it is possible for different stakeholders to work together for the common good of students with exceptionalities."