



**ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION**

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November 26, 2019

The Honorable Stephen Lecce
Minister of Education

Dear Minister Lecce,

This letter is sent on behalf of the trustees from the Northern region school boards. We were very pleased to have the opportunity to speak recently with Minister Rickford at our October Northern meeting to share perspectives on the unique needs of our region. Our collective focus remains on improving the graduation rates and the life trajectories for all our students and their families.

The Northern meeting was focused on reviewing our immediate and long-term improvement strategies, priority areas and overall progress over the past three years. Below is a summary of immediate and long-term strategies that were reaffirmed, as well as key priority areas that were discussed. We look forward to continuing the dialogue and it is hoped that with your support, we can continue to collaborate and coordinate our collective efforts.

Although a number of the Northern school boards have made progress in graduation rates and on specific indicators over the past three years, collectively the graduation rates are some of the lowest in the province. This is due to many factors, unique to the North, that in order to overcome will take a concerted, collaborative effort in partnership with the provincial government. Northern school boards understand the provincial fiscal realities, but also know that strategic investments in high leverage strategies can lead to significant benefits over time. This letter provides exemplary strategies that, if implemented in the North, can make a lasting impact on student achievement and well-being.

Immediate Impact Strategies

The following are strategies that could be incorporated into the 2020-2021 Grants for Student Needs (GSN) funding that are specific to Northern school boards:

- over the next three years incrementally increase the number of graduation coaches to provide flexibility for school boards to utilize this important resource in secondary and elementary schools, as required, to support at-risk students and students who identify as Indigenous in the North;
- address the loss in "top up" dollars in the North where schools cannot be closed due to severe impacts on community, as well as transportation issues arising from geography and low population density (e.g. long bus times);
- implement differentiated staffing formulas for Northern school boards, thus lowering classroom ratios to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of caring adults in schools;

- continue and expand funding for the Northern Support Initiative (NSI), which includes increased in-school specialized supports for students (social workers, child and youth workers, special education staff, mental health workers, family health teams etc.);
- provide dedicated early intervention teachers and support staff to close the literacy and numeracy gaps;
- provide a transportation subsidy to support experiential learning opportunities for students in the North;
- continue and increase support for dedicated educational programs and supports for key transitions of at-risk students (e.g. for students who identify as Indigenous, students in care and/or in poverty).

Longer Term Strategies

The following strategies require inter-ministerial collaboration and seamless funding models that allow for targeted, coordinated and sustainable interventions that reflect needs within a local community context. The involvement of a number of ministries makes these priorities complex, but no less important, to effect sustained change in the North. These include:

- coordinating timely access to community mental health, health and support services including expanded public health teams working directly in schools;
- funding of nutrition programs in every school;
- developing a Northern economic development plan built collaboratively by all levels of government-including the local trustee voices;
- developing a differentiated “made in the North” poverty reduction strategy;
- implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), including a mandated Indigenous curriculum component;
- coordinating alignment and seamless funding supports between federal and provincial governments for students who identify as Indigenous;
- facilitate specialized health supports through inter-ministerial collaboration (e.g. mobile health units, in-school health centers in community schools), especially in more northern and remote communities (e.g. Crolancia);

Northern Regional Meeting

A significant portion of the Northern Meeting involved reviewing areas of focus within identified priority areas. Some of the issues discussed also apply to other school boards in the province, however the degree is very different in the North, both in magnitude and context.

Some consistent themes emerged from the discussions that transcend all the following areas of focus including equity, recruitment/retention of specialized staff, Indigenous education, early intervention approaches, effective reciprocal partnerships, TRC Calls to Action, student transitions, and the need for greater flexibility in funding and approach to address local context and challenges in Northern communities.

The following are the top priority areas and associated areas of focus for discussion to improve student achievement and well-being in the North.

Special Education

- Funding;
- Wait lists for assessments;
- Specialized services once assessment/needs are identified;
- Staff recruitment and retention issues.

Indigenous Education

- Mandatory Indigenous curriculum –TRC Calls to Action;
- Flexibility in qualification requirements for Indigenous language teachers;
- More land based support for learning;
- Broad based leadership opportunities for students who identify as Indigenous (e.g. Student Trustees);
- Elders, Senators and Knowledge keepers in classrooms;
- Culturally responsive or inclusive spaces (e.g. smudging rooms).

Experiential Learning – Support for Multiple Program Pathways

- Four versus five year graduation rates – calculation rate formula and course availability;
- Specialist High Skills Major Programs (SHSM)-Red Seal and funding access;
- Alignment and partnerships with industry and skilled trades;
- Trades and apprenticeship issues;
- Trades Committee processes, Labour Council Incentives.

Services and Supports for Students – Mental Health and Well-Being

- Increased flexible funding to address local issues and timely access – gaps in service and support;
- Recruitment of specialty staff;
- Siloed approach to funding, initiatives and information sharing;
- Lead roles/geography challenges – e.g. 1 Mental Health Lead and 1 Indigenous Lead
- Suicide prevention and intervention funding;
- Substance Use, Vaping Issues.

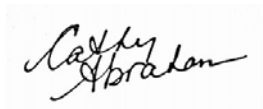
OPSBA and the Northern school boards are very committed to making a difference in the lives of children, youth and their families. We are prepared to elaborate on or answer any questions regarding the proposed strategies, priorities and areas of focus contained in this letter.

We would welcome an opportunity to meet with you and explore how we can work together to move these priorities forward to improve student achievement and well-being. We understand how busy your schedule is and as such we offer a variety of opportunities to meet including:

- attending a dedicated northern session at our upcoming Public Education Symposium, January 24-25, 2020, in Toronto. A time will be arranged to suit your schedule.

- attending a Northern region director's meeting held in Toronto at the OPSBA office, at 4:00 p.m. on either Friday, February 21 or Friday, May 1, and/or
- an invitation for you to visit a variety of schools in the North that we can help to facilitate.
- assist in arranging a meeting with the appropriate Ministry staff to discuss the contents of this letter.

We look forward to your response and very much value your commitment to student achievement, well-being, equity and making a difference for our students and their families in the North.



Cathy Abraham
OPSBA President



Mark Mannisto
Regional Chair Northern Region

Cc: Minister Rickford, Minister of Energy, Mines, Northern Development and Indigenous Affairs
Nancy Naylor, Deputy Minister of Education
Jeff Brennan, Director of Stakeholder Relations, Minister's Officer (Education)
David Big-Canoe, Stakeholder and Partner Relations Advisor, Minister's Office (Indigenous Affairs)
Dominic Roszak, Director, Stakeholder and Partner Relations and Operations, Minister's Office (Energy, Northern Development and Mines)