



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Submission to the 2021 Ontario Budget Consultation





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February 11, 2021

The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance and President of the Treasury Board of Ontario
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Dear Minister Bethlenfalvy:

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) appreciates this opportunity to provide comments in response to the government's 2021 Ontario Budget Consultations. On behalf of OPSBA, I recently participated in a virtual consultation conducted by your office and was able to share some of our education funding recommendations.

We know that education continues to be the second-largest line in the Ontario budget and we appreciate the additional funding that has been given to boards for the safe return to school for this unusual year. Aside from the instability of COVID-19, school boards require strong, predictable and equitable education funding in order to set the conditions that promote and sustain improved student achievement and well-being.

The education budget, through the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) provided annually to school boards, has real and direct impacts on the lives of students, their families and the community. We have provided a submission to the Ministry of Education and have included this for your consideration. There continues to be many areas of funding within the GSN that need to be protected and/or enhanced. These include: special education and supports for children and youth mental health, indigenous education, the unique challenges faced by our northern and rural school communities, French as a Second Language (FSL), skilled trades and apprenticeships, capital and facilities, student transportation, technology and broadband needs, as well as e-learning supports.

A lack of funding predictability affects school board planning for both the short and long term. School boards need information to be released and shared within reasonable timelines to make responsible decisions that ensure the continuity of programs, supports and services. Appropriate funding that allows students to be provided with a range of program options allowing them to pursue a pathway that supports their interests and strengths is also needed.

We appreciate your consideration of this submission and look forward to the release of the GSNs and the full provincial budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Abraham". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Cathy Abraham
President
Ontario Public School Boards' Association

Note: OPSBA did submit a [response](#) to Bill 229, Protect, Support and Recover from COVID-19 Act (Budget Measures), 2020

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.

Current and Upcoming COVID-19 Pandemic-Related Funding Pressures

As we have stated before, the pandemic is not a situation anyone working in the public education system has had to manage before, and the long-term impacts to mental health, well-being and student achievement are yet to be fully understood. It has highlighted how central and stabilizing the school system is to our communities, children, youth and their families. The current ever-changing environment of lockdown measures and delays to the return of in-school learning in many parts of the province has reinforced the importance of an educator knowing their students and their students' learning needs.

We continue to be extremely proud of the monumental work done by our teachers, education workers, and school board staff who have done their very best to provide continued learning opportunities and support for their students. This includes the creative use of outdoor spaces as places to teach and this should be considered for future capital decisions.

Although there have been funding announcements throughout the year, many school boards have (as directed by the Ministry of Education) used their reserve funds for pandemic-related expenses. These boards are seeking full reimbursement of any reserve funds used, as these were earmarked for specific future projects.

Other continuing pandemic costs incurred by boards include:

- Additional staff – both teachers and education workers; and also extra senior administration if needed;
- Digital devices for staff and students;
- Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment*;
- Increased energy costs due to windows being open for ventilation;
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other teacher learning supports (i.e. microphones, alternative learning packages for students – both the creation of the packages and the delivery of them to students);
- Cleaning – supplies and custodial/caretaking staffing;
- Student transportation – drivers are unable to adequately monitor students in keeping masks on, maintaining distance, and staying in their seats. Some boards are requesting funding for bus monitors to be added to each route for the duration of the pandemic;
- Continued support for online learning as demand grows and changes. School boards are constantly having to alter their staff complement and operations to adjust to the changes in their students' learning choices; and,
- Continued support for parents and guardians to support virtual learning (e.g. IT call centre).

*The Public Health Agency of Canada released a [report](#) on the importance of indoor ventilation during the pandemic

OPSBA would like to see an increase in the number of public health nurses connected to schools and develop a future model for public health nurses to continue to work in Ontario schools past the end of the pandemic. It is predicted that there will be a pandemic of mental health needs following the COVID-19 pandemic. Having the continuity of public health nurses

embedded in school boards/schools would lead to a coordinated tiered response to mental health needs led by School Mental Health Ontario.

With the ongoing rollout of the administration of vaccines, these health care professionals could be part of any discussion about the vaccination of students and/or the use of schools as vaccination sites. It was noted that public schools are mandated to work with their local public health units, but this relationship is not reciprocally mandated. This should be a joint responsibility.

We are also keen to see more details on the expansion of asymptomatic testing of students and staff beyond the initial four regions. School boards are eager to work with the Ministry of Education and their local public health units on this initiative.

As mentioned above, the reality of post-pandemic needs are yet to be fully determined but we are aware there will be a need for supports and resources to combat learning loss and potential knowledge gaps. There are many vulnerable, marginalized students that will need to be assessed and supported who could need extra academic help, tutoring and graduation coaches. There may be difficulties in providing access to these services across the province.

The Ministry of Education, looking ahead to the next school year, needs to acknowledge that education funding through the GSN alone cannot address what is and will be required to successfully help students and staff. OPSBA suggests partnering with the Ministry of Education on post-pandemic research linked to learning loss, mental health needs and unanticipated needs for additional supports and services. Trustees have suggested consideration be given to providing extra time for those secondary students who struggled this school year, to complete their necessary courses requirements and graduate.

Going forward we suggest the Ministry of Education re-establish funding for many professional development opportunities for teachers and education workers. It is suggested that Faculties of Education increase virtual learning course preparation and delivery as part of their pre-service education program.

Finally, as the sector looks to the future, we look to the government to help us support initiatives to rebuild trust and confidence in the public education system.

In the section below we have identified the key areas of funding that support OPSBA's multi-year priorities that focus on increasing student achievement and well-being.

Equity and Inclusion

Anti-Racism Initiatives

OPSBA recently passed a resolution at its 2020 Annual General Meeting about the importance of anti-racism and anti-oppression initiatives. Given long-standing systemic racism and bias that exists in society, the time for collective and coordinated strategic action is overdue. Our members

want there to be a focus that specifically addresses racism towards Black and Indigenous Ontarians. School boards are united in their commitment to these efforts and look to the Ministry of Education to assist in supporting these efforts as described below. More recently, OPSBA's Board of Directors unanimously supported the idea of conducting an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion audit to determine the best approach to combatting systemic racism and oppressive practices introspectively. School board trustees continue to be willing to attend Ministry of Education sponsored equity and inclusion training, which was established a few years ago.

OPSBA recommends:

- Funding for research and the collection of identity-based data on educational outcomes, as well as effective practices, strategies, and approaches.
- Providing ongoing, incremental, iterative professional development opportunities along with job-embedded approaches, to support these initiatives.
- Support OPSBA's efforts to increase the representation of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) running for Trustee or OPSBA positions.
- The Ministry of Education establish a working group/committee dedicated to this work.

With regard to equity and anti-racism, we will be looking closely at our future conferences and events, and seeking to bring in appropriate speakers, have discussions, provide professional development and more to ensure we are doing everything we can to fight systemic racism that exists in society.

Special Education

Special Education continues to be an area that is underfunded given the prevalence and complexity of student needs. This is even more significant where community services and supports are not readily available or easily accessible and have been exacerbated during COVID-19. These students could potentially have even more significant learning gaps that need to be intentionally addressed.

OPSBA recommends:

- Predictable and responsive funding that reflects the ongoing specialized needs of students who require special education supports and/or services.
- Continued review of the special education grant components to ensure they are reflective of the current school board realities.
- A comprehensive review to fully understand the issue of wait time assessments and the gaps in services and access to professional staff across the province. This is more acute in northern, rural, and remote communities.
- That special education and specifically autism supports and services continue to be reviewed and revised to meet the student and family needs especially as it relates to the impact of COVID-19 on learning and well-being.
- Continued support for the valuable contributions that our school treatment centres offer to students and their families, and for locally seconded staff.

Children and Youth Mental Health

OPSBA continues to support the implementation of a Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. With data indicating that approximately one in five children and youth in Ontario have a mental health challenge, we believe early investments in school-based mental health and addictions services will yield long-term benefits for the health care system and the wellness of students and future generations. Currently, due to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the prevalence of mental health issues among students has risen exponentially.

OPSBA recognizes the direct funding linked to School Mental Health Ontario to produce resources and to guide support for students as well as families and most recently the inclusion of staff well-being resources.

All of the recommendations below must also be looked at through the lens of the pandemic and its impact. There needs to be a collective understanding that mental health and well-being will require a sustained predictable commitment of government funding to effectively address the increase need for supports and services for students, staff and families for the foreseeable future.

OPSBA recommends:

- A continued focus on maintaining and expanding the resources and supports to children and youth and their families, especially during and post-pandemic.
- The Ministry continue to correspondingly increase the funding for School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) resources and its sustainable infrastructure.
- Provide for a continued increase in the number of school-based mental health workers and community supports for sufficient and timely pathways to care across the province, especially in northern and remote areas.
- Ensure a focus on mental health supports for transitional youth, especially youth transitioning to post-secondary settings, with an even greater focus in this area due to the pandemic.
- Additional resources for attendance counsellor support and credit recovery/rescue support especially to reengage students and families as a result of remote learning (e.g. increase in home schooling).
- The provincial government continue to advocate to the federal government for additional funding for mental health care.

While this is more of a physical health issue, and tangentially related to mental health, the stigma and access to menstrual products in schools has become an active advocacy issue among our student trustees and several member boards. Many boards have made the local decision to find funding from within their budget to provide free menstrual products in elementary and secondary schools. OPSBA recommends the Ministry of Education, possibly with support from the Ministry of Health, provide dedicated funding for purchase of these products. This could be considered an item to be obtained by Supply Ontario, the government's centralized procurement agency.

Indigenous Education

Supporting and strengthening Indigenous education continues to be a priority for First Nations, for OPSBA, and for governments across the country. Advancing reconciliation in support of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a major focus of OPSBA's Indigenous Trustees' Council and is one of OPSBA's main priorities. In protecting and revitalizing culture, and recognizing that culture and language are inseparable and necessary for reconciliation and history to be reclaimed, OPSBA recommends improved funding for dedicated Indigenous language instruction, taught by accredited Indigenous language speakers. OPSBA also recommends that programming and staffing, such as graduation coaches, be enhanced, particularly at the secondary level to support Indigenous languages, teachings about the legacy of the Canadian Indian residential school system, and land-based teaching.

A lack of broadband access is an issue for many Indigenous students, which has been even more problematic in the current pandemic environment. Achievement gaps have the potential to

widen between those who have technological access and those who do not. Investing in this is critical to the educational future of these students.

Supporting the promotion and development of Indigenous people into teaching positions and teachers into leadership positions – such as school principals and vice-principals, supervisory officers, and directors of education – will advance reconciliation. Annualized funding with a long-term commitment to supporting the development of First Nations educational leaders will provide a growing pool of talent and mentorship for Indigenous youth.

Northern and Rural Challenges

Our northern and rural members continue to identify the unique needs and challenges their communities face which include declining student enrolment, loss of community employers, difficulty attracting and retaining employees and overall geography. Access to supports and services that other jurisdictions take for granted are not readily available and as such a one size fits all approach does not work for northern, rural and remote areas of the province. Student transportation is a major issue when considering the availability of qualified drivers, length of routes, extreme temperatures, number of rides per day given extracurricular support, and the costs of air transportation for Indigenous students from remote northern communities who attend public schools in urban communities. Northern students may also face many additional hardships especially in the area of equity of access due to insufficient broadband capability and/or costly internet services. Every effort has to be made to address these issues to maximize student engagement, improve achievement, graduation rates and well-being.

OPSBA respectfully requests the Ministry of Education to:

- Act on the list of identified needs and short and long term strategies and recommendations outlined in our [November 26, 2019 letter to Minister Lecce](#)
- Commit to an ongoing dialogue between northern government MPPs and our education leaders.

Program and Curriculum Supports

Professional Learning

Building capacity for teachers, education workers and school administrators is an essential component for a successful provincial education system. When school staff participate in professional learning and training, it promotes professional dialogue and reflective practice and facilitates alignment of classroom and instructional practice with the school improvement process/district strategic plan. These important collaborative professional learning activities produce the necessary cohesion and synergy for improving student achievement.

OPSBA recommends:

- Delivering responsive, relevant professional learning and training that has direct application to improving learning and working conditions in classrooms and schools, while building staff confidence and maximizing engagement.
- Providing ongoing professional development in multiple formats – virtual, collaborative inquiry (TLLP), job-embedded, and not just linked to Professional Activity (PA) Days.

- Providing increased supports and resources to support the increased emphasis regarding remote and online learning.

French as a Second Language (FSL)

OPSBA has recently completed a three-year Ontario Labour Market Partnership initiative with the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development entitled *Meeting Labour Market Needs for French as a Second Language Instruction* in Ontario. This initiative was in response to concerns raised by OPSBA member boards about the growing gap between the number of students enrolling in French language programs and the recruitment and retention of sufficient numbers of FSL teachers and support staff. This issue has become an increasing challenge for all English language public school boards in Ontario. School boards continue to struggle with providing opportunities for student and parent choice for FSL options and this has been especially exacerbated during COVID-19. Issues relate to:

- Significant accommodation pressures causing multiple boundary changes leading to a lack of predictability for families
- Inability to recognize French Immersion as a rationale for Capital projects
- Significant transportation costs not recognized for this "optional program"
- A lack of sufficient numbers of language proficient French teachers at both the elementary and secondary level as well as French language ECE's and other education workers
- Limiting Core French to only 600 hours of instruction which begins in Grade 4 rather than starting earlier in Grade 1
- Maintaining English track viability in dual track schools
- Relocating English track students out of neighbourhood schools to accommodate French immersion.

OPSBA recommends:

- Undertaking a provincial review of FSL program opportunities with a focus on teacher supply and demand issues in an effort to alleviate significant school board pressures and to more accurately reflect the current reality of parent/guardian choice in a plurilingual society.
- Funding to support innovative workable solutions as outlined in OPSBA's Labour Market Partnership three-year initiative to support the on-going collaborative work of the multi-sectoral FSL Labour Market Partnership to:
 - i. Mobilize the research findings from Phase I, II and III of the labour market partnership report with English-language publicly funded school boards in order to deepen understanding of the factors affecting FSL teacher recruitment, hiring, professional support and retention.
 - ii. Facilitate the implementation of promising strategies and practices in English-language publicly funded school boards that directly affect the recruitment, hiring, professional support and retention of FSL teachers.

Skilled Trades and Apprenticeship

OPSBA would like to see more focus at the provincial and local school board level to help students develop positive attitudes toward the trades and be provided with more 'hands on' and experiential learning opportunities. An apprenticeship focus can easily be expanded and integrated into existing vocational school programs and through secondary school experiential and cooperative education programs, as well as Specialist High Skills Majors. This will involve

balancing and/or shifting funding levels for commencing an apprenticeship to secondary schools rather than only in post-secondary and employment settings.

OPSBA recommends:

- Support continued funding for the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and the Specialist High Skills Major programs, but also request that the government expand relevant opportunities for students to begin to earn apprenticeship hours while in secondary school and address the issue of a lack of skilled trades' education and apprenticeship options for Indigenous students in Indigenous communities.
- Providing dedicated funding for renovations in secondary school facilities and new construction to provide shop programs to support careers in the trades (Grades 7 to 12)
- Support for amendments that will change the journey person to apprentice ratio for all trades to increase student access to these career opportunities.
- A targeted marketing and communications plan, specifically directed at parents, students, educators and employers, to further elevate skilled trades to an even more respected pathway.

System Infrastructure

Capital and Facilities

Schools need to be built and maintained to accommodate future population and program growth to support student achievement and well-being. In many areas, schools remain community hubs and need to be supported for their community use. Some boards continue to struggle with renewal costs for their aging schools and are unable to enhance their facilities to meet the needs of students as they learn and grow. Capital projects need to be announced regularly and predictably and based on the local needs of the school board, without political interference. Delays between approvals and monies flowing lead to increased costs for goods and services which are absorbed by the board.

OPSBA recommends:

- Continuing to provide funding for capital maintenance for heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, as well as structural, mechanical and electrical repairs.
- Amending the Education Development Charge (EDC) regulation to allow for flexibility for non-eligible boards to collect EDCs and increase the EDC rates to accurately match actual land purchase costs.
- Lifting the moratorium on school closures and releasing the revised Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG).
- Revising capital benchmarks to support appropriate physical distancing for funded average class sizes.
- Continuing to release capital priority funding on a regular planning cycle. And, to provide greater transparency in the decisions for why capital projects are approved and denied.

Student Transportation

OPSBA is currently a member of the Ministry of Education's Student Transportation Advisory Group that has been reviewing the funding formula for student transportation, consortia model

and operations, and procurement. We look forward to the release of the group's findings and any recommendations. School boards note the top transportation issues continue to be ride times, driver retention, funding, and school bus safety. Many boards regularly overspend their transportation budgets to meet their own unique needs. Some of the issues boards need to consider include:

- Working with their co-terminus boards for shared bus routes
- Program decisions that change bell times
- Accommodating student participation in field trips, sporting events and extracurricular activities
- Partnering with local municipalities to share busing
- Supporting students who are at risk or those with special education needs
- Traffic congestion and road construction issues
- Increasing costs charged by bus operators not matching ministry funding levels

OPSBA recommends:

- Releasing information and recommendations from the current Student Transportation Advisory Committee.
- Considering the unique student transportation circumstances that each board (northern, rural and urban) faces.
- Investing funds to attract and retain school bus drivers.
- Considering sufficient funding to match or support appropriate physical distances on elementary school buses.

Technology and Broadband

Investments need to continue in order for school boards to enrich the classroom experience for teachers and students through access to computers and software. Upgrades and access to broadband internet is also needed beyond the school setting, which is currently lacking in many rural, remote, northern and Indigenous communities. Issues of poverty, and the lack of reliable and affordable internet services across the province continue to create gaps in equitable learning opportunities for vulnerable and marginalized student populations. We are also aware of boards that are facing increased costs associated with the price of licensing software.

OPSBA recommends:

- Continuing the work of the Broadband Modernization Program to ensure there is equity and timely access for all school boards across the province.
- Regularly connecting with school boards to identify areas where infrastructure gaps remain.
- Providing sufficient technology funding to school boards to purchase and maintain sufficient devices for students.

E-Learning

OPSBA continues to support the use of technology as a vehicle to facilitate learning, but it should never be considered a replacement to guided face-to-face teaching and learning that occurs in school classrooms. This has never been more evident than during the pandemic. We believe every student must have access to a device and reliable internet service for full engagement and equity of access and opportunity. Enhanced professional learning for educators who will use technology and digital resources is also needed.

If some aspect of e-Learning/virtual school is to continue as an option for students and their families, there must be funding to support it. School boards cannot financially sustain two parallel modes of learning.

OPSBA recommends:

- Continuing the administration and governance by school boards of e-Learning consortia and e-Learning course development funding.
- Responding positively to the recommendations in the prior [OPSBA Submission to the Ministry of Education regarding the proposed expanded TVO mandate](#)
- Continuing investment through the technology and learning fund to enrich the classroom experience for students through access to computer resources and software, and to strengthen professional learning for educators who will use technology and digital resources.
- Sufficient funding for school boards to offer multiple learning models.



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