



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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“Check Against Delivery”

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CATHY: Good afternoon.

My name is Cathy Abraham. I am the President of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) and have been a part of OPSBA's executive for seven years. I am also a public school board trustee with the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board and have been a trustee for 15 years.

Joining me today is our Executive Director, Rusty Hick who has over 30 years of experience as an educator through his previous roles as a teacher, principal, superintendent and director of education.

We thank you for this opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Social Policy and to speak to Bill 48, the Safe and Supportive Classrooms Act, which includes proposed amendments to the *Early Childhood Educators Act, the Education Act, the Ontario College of Teachers Act and the Teaching Profession Act*.

OPSBA represents 31 English public district school boards and 10 public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 70 per cent of elementary and secondary students in the province. We advocate on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario and part of that advocacy includes monitoring provincial legislation that could impact our student, staff and school communities.

We are here today to share our thoughts with you about some of the proposed legislative changes in Bill 48. The changes we would like to comment on are:

- Allowing the Minister of Education to establish policies and guidelines respecting service animals in schools
- Requiring teachers to successfully complete a math test before obtaining their teacher's license

- Revoking teaching certificates from teachers disciplined by their profession's regulatory body for committing sexual abuse against a student or child, and;
- Proclaiming existing provisions allowing for the funding of counselling and therapy support for children who are victims of sexual abuse by a teacher or an early childhood educator

School boards have a responsibility to promote student achievement and well-being. We all want safe and supportive classrooms for children. As local trustees, who are on the ground, we hear firsthand about the needs of our students, their families and school communities. That is why it was important to us to appear before you today to speak to the proposed amendments.

The proposed amendment to the *Education Act* gives the Minister of Education the authority to establish a provincial service animal policy and/or guideline that school boards must adhere to when developing their own local service animal policies.

We strongly believe students with special needs and their families deserve to have the supports and resources that allow them to engage in their classrooms and school activities.

School boards across the province have noted an increase in the number of requests for the accommodation of service animals due to the proven benefit they can have for some students with disabilities or special needs. Service dogs, for instance, can help lower a student's anxiety and stress levels, teach behaviour management or modification skills and foster a sense of responsibility, which all help to create the best conditions for a student to fully participate in their learning.

Many of our member boards already have a service animal policy or procedure in place while others review on a case-by-case basis. At the same time, we must also keep in mind the rights of students and staff who may have a fear of animals, cultural sensitivities, or physical or medical realities of their own.

At my home board, we have a comprehensive Service Animal Protocol in place. The protocol outlines the procedures necessary for bringing a service animal into a school or board site, identifies potential concerns and offers practical strategies to support access.

The protocol also promotes confidence in our schools and board sites by recognizing and meeting the special needs of diverse student, staff and community populations.

But I know there is an inconsistent approach for requesting the use of service animals across the province that can be confusing and frustrating for parents who are seeking support for their children.

OPSBA supports the development of a consistent provincial service animal policy with minimum requirements that boards can adapt locally. School boards are also looking for consistency in the certification and mandatory training of service dogs. In addition, school boards need a clearly defined, common understanding of the use of emotional support or therapy animals for which there is no current legislation or provincial certification. This continues to be a grey area.

As a publicly funded school system, we welcome the opportunity to participate in any discussions and provide our input. We recommend that any stakeholder engagement on this issue be done as soon as possible as policy implementation is anticipated for the start of the upcoming 2019/2020 school year.

At this time, we would be remiss if we didn't mention the ongoing underfunding of Special Education and supports for Mental Health in this context. OPSBA continues to advocate for increased opportunities, supports and coordinated services for students with mental health and special needs. Both of these issues represent significant cost pressures for school boards and impact student achievement and well-being. These issues were outlined in our recent funding submission to the Ministry of Education and are part of regular conversations with Ministry staff.

We just had an OPSBA Board of Directors meeting last weekend -- at which every member board has a representative in attendance. One of the major discussion topics was the recent announcement about changes to autism services. Our member boards expressed concern about the lack of detailed information given the April 1 deadline and what this will actually mean at the local level. They have questions as to how many students will now be in schools full time who were previously offsite and receiving therapy and whether or not there will be enough qualified staff to support them. OPSBA will be asking the Ministry of Education for more information and will connect further with its member boards.

I would like to ask Rusty to speak now to some of our other observations on the proposed legislative changes in Bill 48.

RUSTY: Thank you Cathy. We are all well aware of the government's commitment to increasing student math performance. We recognize the steps taken to meet that objective including the development of a teacher's guide and parent fact sheet that was distributed last fall and the re-allocation of board funding to support teacher training in mathematics.

OPSBA supports professional learning and developing applicable relevant resources that will continue to help build understanding of math concepts and a range of effective instructional strategies that will assist teachers in becoming more comfortable and confident in teaching math.

The proposed amendment requiring teachers to successfully complete a math test before obtaining their teaching license, raised a number of questions for our members including:

- Will this requirement lead to other similar proficiency tests for other subjects?
- Will this apply to both elementary and secondary teachers and therefore require different tests?
- How will the data from the recent public consultations on the topic of math be considered?

We recommend that development of this regulation involve stakeholder participation before anything is finalized.

As Cathy said earlier, school boards have a moral and legislative responsibility under the *Education Act* to ensure student achievement and well-being. For us, this inherently includes student safety.

That is why OPSBA fully supports the proposed amendments that would call for the mandatory revocation of a member's registration certificate if they are found guilty by their profession's regulatory body for committing sexual abuse against a student or child. Increasing safety measures that protect children should be of the highest priority.

Finally, the government's commitment to move forward as of January 1, 2020, with allowing the Colleges to develop funding therapy and counseling programs for student victims of sexual abuse should be applauded. It is the right thing to do to help victims heal.

Our only recommendation is that consideration be given to allowing past and current victims of student sexual abuse to access counselling and therapy. There should be a discussion about grand-parenting claimants.

CATHY: Thank you for considering our recommendations into Bill 48, Safe and Supporting Classrooms Act.

We have a more comprehensive submission outlining our recommendations that has been shared with the clerk.

We would be happy to take any questions.