



**ONTARIO PUBLIC  
SCHOOL BOARDS'  
ASSOCIATION**

**Leading Education's Advocates**

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**January 31, 2020**

**Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA)  
2020-21 Education Funding / Grants for Student Needs Submission**



The Honourable Stephen Lecce  
Minister of Education

Dear Minister:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments to the Ministry of Education's Grants for Student Needs (GSN) consultation. This submission reflects OPSBA's comprehensive member engagement process, with discussions at regional meetings, discussions with our Policy Development and Education Program Work Teams, input from our Indigenous Trustees' Council and surveys sent to each member board, as well as comments from Senior Business Officials.

Knowing that Education is the second-largest funding line in the Ontario budget, this consultation is important as we believe in strong, predictable and equitable education funding as the foundational factors in setting the conditions that promote and sustain improved student achievement and well-being.

This year, the ministry has asked stakeholders for “*initiatives that could support reducing red tape and administrative burden for the education sector.*” It must be stated that efficiencies are constantly being found by school boards and schools so that as much funding as possible is directed to students in the classroom. School boards have long been streamlining back office functions and taking advantage of technology. With regard to reducing red tape, we suggest the ministry consider the following:

- Lift the moratorium on school closures and release the revised Pupil Accommodation Review Guidelines (PARG). This will allow school boards to make prudent programming and financial decisions
- Release the long-awaited capital priority funding. School boards need to move forward and continue to implement their long-term strategic plans to support their students, families and communities
- Amend the Education Development Charge (EDC) regulation. Allow for flexibility for non-eligible boards to collect EDCs and increase the EDC rates to one that accurately matches actual land purchase costs.
- Use current census data and authentic benchmarks for funding calculations.

While we understand the government’s current fiscal environment, students, schools and school boards have real needs and concerns. Appropriate funding should provide students with a range of program options that allow them to pursue a pathway that supports their interests and strengths.

Recent polling done in partnership with Nanos Research found that a majority of Ontarians agree that spending in public education is an investment in the future. Other results include:

- 83% of Ontarians support or somewhat support school boards having more autonomy to ensure their budgets reflect local needs.
- Ontarians are twice as likely to say that spending on public education is more important than eliminating the deficit.
- Two-thirds of Ontarians oppose or somewhat oppose having larger class sizes and less course selection in order to save money.
- Two-thirds of Ontarians also think education funding needs to keep up with enrolment growth.

Details of this research can be found [on our website](#).

Last October, OPSBA met with Minister Greg Rickford to discuss the unique challenges facing the northern school boards. Students in the North deserve to have the same opportunities as other students across the province. A follow up [letter](#) was sent that highlighted these concerns, including declining enrolment, loss of community employers, as well as simple geography, which all contribute to obstacles in delivering quality educational programming for those students.

### Timing

Many boards have begun their budget consultation process and because of this, we respectfully ask that the GSN announcement occur in March 2020 or if need be, that the ministry provide information in multiple parts to start the flow of information earlier. School boards are accountable for the stewardship of resources and must receive financial information in reasonable timelines to make responsible decisions to ensure the continuity of programs, supports and services that reflect local needs.

Boards are still waiting for the final release of all Priorities and Partnerships Funding (PPF) and recommend the ministry communicate this as soon as possible. With regard to the PPF, one particular grant was noted more often than others. Changes made to the Parents Reaching Out (PRO) Grants have been felt by boards with the decrease in overall funding and the downloading of the administrative workload of allocating the funds. We recommend restoring the PRO grant level and re-examining the distribution process.

In addition, some boards are still feeling the effects of the decision to change the maximum in-year deficit when determining their budgets. We recommend the ministry continue to allow board flexibility and work through plans to reach balanced budgets. Our informal survey to member boards indicated that many will struggle to produce a balanced budget in June, and therefore expect to draw on their reserve funds to balance.

### Collective Bargaining

Ongoing labour negotiations have made an impact on many students, schools and the education community. Our Association believes that teachers and education workers deeply influence a positive and productive learning environment for students and are supported in this role through the peace and stability engendered by successfully negotiated collective agreements. It is OPSBA's goal to negotiate fair and equitable collective agreements through the collective bargaining process. Increased sick leave costs continue to be cited by boards as a significant cost pressure. We recommend that all agreements be fully funded.

Ontarians need and deserve a public education system that is supported by stable, responsive and predictable funding to support long-term student achievement and well-being strategies.

OPSBA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback and we look forward to continuing this important conversation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Abraham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cathy Abraham  
OPSBA President

**Below we have identified key areas of funding that support our multi-year priorities focused on increasing student achievement and well-being.**

### **Special Education Grant**



Special Education continues to be an area in which boards request more supports and resources given the complexities of student needs. This is even more significant where community services and supports are not readily available or easily accessible. This is especially the case in northern, rural and remote communities. The corollary is also true that urban areas attract families of students with medical/health and other significant needs because of greater access to services and supports (e.g. treatment centres).

OPSBA and its member boards continue to monitor and track the impact of the phased-in Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (formerly High Needs Amount) to ensure adequate supports and services for all special education students. OPSBA recommends the ministry assist school boards in continuing to help parents and communities understand the funding elements of special education.

Most boards continue to enrol newcomer and refugee students into their schools, with many arriving with very high needs that require additional resources that are not always part of a board's original budget

OPSBA recommends:

- Dedicated additional funding be made available within the special education envelope that reflects the ongoing specialized needs of students who require special education supports and/or services. This is especially true for students with autism. Funding needs to be available for students with special needs who arrive during the school year. It is overwhelmingly agreed that more funding needs to be directed to special education supports and programs/services and training of school staff to help children and youth to reach their full potential.
- Continued review of the special education grant components to ensure that they are reflective of the current school board realities.
- Continued funding for psychological assessments to reduce wait times.

## **Children and Youth Mental Health**

OPSBA continues to support the need for a Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy and was pleased to see this referenced in Bill 116, *Foundations for Promoting and Protecting Mental Health and Addictions Services Act*, 2019. There needs to be a continued focus on maintaining and expanding the resources and supports to children and youth and their families. Early investments in school-based mental health and addictions will yield long-term benefits for the health care system and the wellness of students and future generations.



OPSBA recommends:

- The Ministry maintain the increased level of School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) infrastructure to support the continued development of evidence-based resources and to support school boards and their mental health leads in implementing effective strategies related to the full continuum of services that includes mental health literacy, promotion of positive social-emotional development, prevention of mental health problems, intervention services and clear pathways to care. The recent three-year funding allocation for SMHO is very much appreciated for continuity and planning purposes. We continue to recommend that sustainable funding for this be enveloped and rolled into the GSN. This will allow for better long-term, incremental planning and sustainable impact to school-based mental health support and services. The SMHO infrastructure has evolved into a nationally and provincially recognized, evidence based approach that should be supported as a permanent support model for school based mental health K-12 in Ontario school boards.
- Providing an increase in the number of school-based mental health workers and community supports for sufficient pathways to care across the province, especially in northern and remote areas.
- Continued funding to effectively implement Mental Health Literacy supports for Kindergarten to Grade 12, incorporating ongoing training for all staff working directly with children and youth in schools.
- Ensuring that the government's comprehensive strategy, referenced in Bill 116, provides for the expansion of evidence-based mental health and well-being supports, services and programs to create a sustainable funding model for children and youth mental health in Ontario.
- Providing funding support for school-wide promotion of positive social and emotional development to strengthen mental health literacy among children and youth themselves.
- Continued support and expansion of Youth Wellness Hubs in all communities in the province.

## Indigenous Education



Advancing Reconciliation is a priority of OPSBA – supporting this through Indigenous education is important for all school boards. We support a curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 that contains clear expectations that every student will acquire knowledge and understanding of Treaties and of the historical context that gave rise to residential schools, the impact on Indigenous children and their families, and the ongoing legacy that is the responsibility of all Canadians.

Indigenous students are one of the fastest growing student populations across the province, and in fact, are the fastest growing student demographic in Northern Ontario, with more students self-identifying as Indigenous every year. Increases have also been seen in the number of Indigenous Trustees as members of public school boards, with more Boards moving to formalize the representation of Indigenous students at the governance level.

OPSBA recommends:

- Sufficient funding be given to cover curriculum resources and staff training to support the implementation of a comprehensive Ontario curriculum. This should contain clear expectations that every Ontario student will acquire knowledge and understanding of Treaties and of the historical context that gave rise to residential schools, the impact on First Nation, Métis and Inuit children and their families, and the ongoing legacy that is the responsibility of all Canadians.
- The ministry continue to address closing the achievement and graduation rate gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students to ensure success. Graduation coaches are one example of an initiative that has shown proven results in a number of OPSBA member boards.
- The ministry address the often problematic transition point between Grade 8 and 9 for Indigenous students.

## Skilled Trades and Apprenticeships

OPSBA sent a submission to the government's Bill 47, *Making Ontario Open for Business Act*, 2018 and stated our strong support for the amendments that changes the journey person to apprentice ratio for all trades (that are not to exceed one apprentice for each journey person).



OPSBA recommends:

- 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. There is evidence-based research and data that should be shared that clearly shows there are, and will continue to be, many opportunities for well-paid skilled trade jobs in the future. This is a career pathway that needs to be part of a comprehensive and

intentional career exploration strategy from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The earlier students and parents are made aware of these types of career opportunities, the more likely there will be an actual increase in the supply pipeline for apprenticeships in the skilled trades. Specific programs or modules for Grades 6 to 9 students would be beneficial. Waiting until students graduate is too late and negatively implies and reinforces that these are careers that should be considered only if other pathways are not attainable.

- The government strongly consider providing relevant opportunities for students, beyond the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), to begin to earn apprenticeship hours while in secondary school, which can then be continued upon graduation with an employer or at the community college level.
- The government address the issue of a lack of skilled trades' education and apprenticeship options for Indigenous students in Indigenous communities. Many First Nation communities would benefit from youth being trained for well-paid skilled trade jobs, so they are not forced to leave their communities in search of employment.

These recommendations will provide an early incentive for students to develop positive attitudes toward the trades, pursue an interest, develop a passion and begin in a very practical way to learn about safety in the workplace. 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.

### **Modern Learning for Today and Tomorrow**



The 2018 Auditor General's report noted significant disparities in the availability of relevant up-to-date classroom technology across our province. OPSBA supports using 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. Issues of poverty, lack of reliable and affordable internet services across the province continue to put forward a compelling argument against the mandating of technological approaches that will have limited accessibility and the potential to create greater gaps in equitable learning opportunities for vulnerable and marginalized student populations. School board approaches have demonstrated a commitment and expertise in providing e-Learning and other

learning opportunities using technology, in a guided, progressive, and inclusive way that maximizes student success.

OPSBA recommends:

- Continuing investment through the technology and learning fund to enrich the classroom experience for students through access to tools and software, and to strengthen professional learning for educators who will use technology and digital resources to enhance student engagement, learning and achievement. This type of funding and future investments will allow school boards to ensure that technology in schools is current and relevant for the various student pathways.

- The government continue the work of the Broadband Modernization Program to ensure there is equity of access for all school boards across the province.
- Plans, programs and funding be based on a well-articulated vision rather than a “pilot project” approach.
- The ministry should coordinate efforts with other ministries to ensure an accessible, equitable technology infrastructure across the province.
- Providing funding to maintain and expand successful e-Learning consortiums (e.g. northern consortium, Ontario e-Learning Consortium) would be beneficial.

### **Student Transportation**

OPSBA is a member of the newly formed Student Transportation Advisory Group that will review the funding formula for student transportation, the consortia model and operations; and student transportation procurement. Our Association last commented on this issue in 2018 in our [response](#) to the previous government’s *New Vision for Student Transportation in Ontario* discussion paper. An OPSBA internal survey at that time found that the top four service issues were: ride times, driver retention, funding, and school bus safety. Many boards continue to overspend their transportation budgets to meet their own unique needs and have many components that are part of their local discussions.



This often includes:

- 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; and
- partnering with local municipalities to share busing;
- the high cost of air transportation for Indigenous students from remote northern communities who attend public schools in urban communities;
- supporting students who are at risk or those with special education needs;
- traffic congestion and road construction issues;
- increasing costs charged by consortia not matching ministry funding levels; and
- extreme temperatures.

OPSBA recommends:

- The ministry dedicate an appropriate amount of time to meet with stakeholders to discuss student transportation challenges, but that a final report with recommendations is released in a timely manner.
- That when the ministry considers any funding formula changes, that consideration is given to the unique circumstances that each board (northern, rural and urban) faces with student transportation.



## **Capital and Facilities Funding**



While we understand that the capital priority announcements for the most recent round of applications will be announced in March, boards will be reviewing the details to ensure the funding covers any increased building costs since tenders were first approved. We also note the increased costs for goods and services in the North.

We continue to advocate that 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.

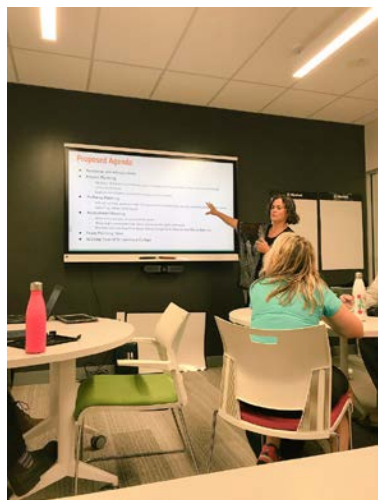
The ministry also indicated a direction for boards to consider supporting more modular buildings in their capital requests. Schools do have portables and porta-packs but these come with their own challenges and are often meant to be temporary solutions. Some boards continue to struggle with renewal costs for their aging schools and are unable to enhance their facilities to meet the needs of students as they learn and grow. Our recent polling indicates that nine in ten Ontarians say it is important or somewhat important to invest in school maintenance and repairs.

With regard to EDCs, amendments were announced last November that included changes to the EDC Rate Restrictions, Alternative Project and Localized Education Development Agreements (LEDA), as well EDC Rate Calculations exemptions. Currently, there are several member boards that are able to qualify for EDCs, and the changes announced supporting alternative projects and LEDAs were welcomed by those boards. However, EDC rates for both residential and non-residential developments were not increased. The rates do not reflect the actual cost of land, resulting in a requirement for school boards to use alternate funding sources or deficit funds. In addition, there were no regulation changes to allow those member boards that have areas of growth to qualify for EDCs.

OPSBA recommends:

- The release of capital priority projects as soon as possible.
- The Ministry of Education conduct a review of benchmark funding amounts to more accurately reflect market costs.
- Stakeholder communications about how capital projects are decided and consideration of changes in number of capital requests per board (currently 10) to a number that is more equitable depending on the size of the school board.
- Remove restrictions in the EDC regulation that prevent growth boards from being eligible to qualify and increase the EDC rates to match local real estate costs.

## Professional Learning



Building capacity for teachers, education workers and school administrators is an essential component for a successful provincial education system. Delivering responsive, relevant professional learning and training that has direct application to improving learning and working conditions in classrooms and schools builds staff confidence and maximizes engagement.

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.

This rationale supports the continuation of the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) model for new teachers and should also include professional learning/training for the revised mathematics curriculum, other new ministry initiatives, as well as building capacity for social emotional learning, mental health literacy and to support the essential strategies of differentiated Instruction, universal design for learning, and assessment for, as and of learning.

Job embedded professional learning has been shown to be the most effective approach and allows for co-learning and co-development with direct application and feedback in the classroom setting. Supply teacher and supply education worker low fill rates along with continuity issues in classrooms have compromised school boards' ability to provide professional learning using a time release model.

OPSBA recommends:

- Continued funding for professional learning/training and NTIP.
- Consideration for funding an instructional peer coaching model that allows schools to have an on-site embedded coach who works alongside teachers and education workers in classrooms. This type of model will allow for continuity in classrooms, collaborative professional dialogue and maximize engagement in building capacity over time. It will allow for a deeper level of implementation, coordination and integration of school and district improvement plans.

## **Leadership Development / Executive Compensation**

School boards also are continuously involved in succession planning and need to recruit and retain education leaders. Training, mentoring and other supports, including appropriate compensation, are needed for Directors of Education and Superintendents. In addition, we are aware that the government intends to amend Ontario Regulation 406/18: Compensation Framework and has indicated that ministry goals and themes are to be included in determining part of a Director of Education's performance and therefore, compensation.



OPSBA has created an ad hoc work group regarding Director of Education Performance Appraisal (DPA) in order to create a template to be shared with all member boards.

OPSBA recommends:

- Information regarding the timing of amendments to *Ontario Regulation 406/18: Compensation Framework* be communicated soon to stakeholders.
- The School Board Administration and Governance funding line support school board leadership.

## **Local Priorities Grant**

School boards continue to stress the need for local flexibility in order to comply with provincial balanced budget legislation, yet still meet unique local cost pressures and needs. Eighty-three percent of Ontarians support or somewhat support school boards having more autonomy to ensure their budgets reflect local needs.



OPSBA recommends:

- The ministry re-establish the Local Priorities Grant. This local priority funding allotment could be used to support specific local board initiatives and funding challenges.

*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.*



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