



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association

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A Brief to the Ministry of Education

Re: 2015-16 Education Funding Consultation Guide &
GSN Consultation

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Brief Re: 2015-16 Education Funding Consultation Guide & GSN Consultation

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) would like to provide our perspective and comments as the Ministry of Education undertakes the task of developing the 2015-16 Grants for Student Needs (GSN) and consults the education sector. OPSBA thanks the Ministry of Education for consulting with the sector on these important funding issues via the regional symposia and meetings with individual associations.

OPSBA has reached out to all English Public school boards in the province through our consultation process. OPSBA consulted with senior business officials, attended the ministry-led stakeholder session and discussed the consultation questions with our trustee working group, Executive Council and Board of Directors.

General comments from the perspective of our school boards include the following:

- School boards appreciate the opportunity for authentic consultation on these important funding issues with the goal of establishing long term funding strategies that are sustainable
- Significant change requires time and often requires upfront financial investments
- Schools boards are constantly seeking ways to be more efficient
- School boards are tasked with both student achievement and well-being – these responsibilities guide decision making
- Decisions must be based on programming needs and financial realities – the best interest of our students is the primary focus of school boards

OPSBA received the following comments & feedback from our school boards with respect to the specific areas of focus in the 2015-16 Education Funding Consultation Guide.

IDENTIFYING EFFICIENCIES

Guiding Principles for Identification of Permanent Savings

Equity and Excellence are foundational principles in the education sector.

School boards need to maintain some flexibility in funding in order to support diversity among student populations and offer locally developed programs for differing student needs.

School boards agree that "Respect for the collective bargaining process" is a funding principle. The Province should fully fund collective agreements.

School boards agree with aligning funding to cost structures.

Equity needs to take into consideration significant differences between boards in the north versus boards in the south.

Changes should promote savings through identifying common approaches across Ministries and sectors.

Areas of Savings

Administrative service hubs could be created to centralize administrative functions for groups of school boards covering areas such as payroll, purchasing, accounting, facility operations and maintenance.

Payroll, purchasing and IT services are functions that can be shared between school boards.

Curriculum and special education services can be shared between coterminous school boards in northern and remote areas.

Initiate an internal review process to look for savings within the Ministry.

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Support the Ministry direction for transportation consortia and further initiatives that support approach of “one road, one bus, one policy”. Transportation funding needs to be allocated on an equitable basis to fund consistent levels of service.

Need integrated and aligned strategic directions for children and youth across Ministries and municipal government.

MAKING MORE EFFICIENT USE OF SCHOOL SPACE

Making More Efficient Use of Space

Strongly encourage the Ministry to continue to offer funding to support school consolidations and to facilitate school board access to capital funding.

School boards are anxious to receive the revised pupil accommodation review guideline.

Would like to see greater sharing of facilities and synergies with municipalities, social agencies and co-terminous school boards.

Current Enrolment and School Space Realities

Urge the Ministry to take into consideration long term growth patterns and ensure that short term decisions on funding do not adversely impact long term accommodation needs for students.

Understand why the pressure is being applied, but the sector is not receiving the tools to address the cause. Difficult time to apply additional pressure to such a politically sensitive issue - school closures/accommodation reviews.

Other Grants as Part of School Space Strategy

Provincial ministries should be directed to consider schools as viable accommodation for their programs.

Community partnerships in schools must not place additional burden on the hosting school board for the operating, capital and administrative costs of agreements.

Consolidate school facilities between co-terminous school boards.

No funding for new schools where there is excess space in co-terminous schools that accommodates the student population of the proposed new building.

Need to recognize competitive atmosphere among school boards.

Streamline Ont.Reg. 444/98 - *DISPOSITION OF SURPLUS REAL PROPERTY*.

Analyze costs of bussing students over long distances in the north versus cost of maintaining some excess space in local communities.

Appreciate the Ministry's investment in capital funding to support school consolidations.

There can be significant costs associated with the ARC process.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Use of Underutilized School Space for Early Learning & Child Care

The funding benchmarks should be adjusted to reflect actual costs of operation, and the funding formula should be adjusted to reflect early learning space and childcare space provided at each school.

Availability of Excess Space to Neighbouring School Boards

Eliminate the calculated rate in Ont. Reg. 444/98 - *DISPOSITION OF SURPLUS REAL PROPERTY* and ensure that all transactions are at market value.

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Recovery of Costs of Excess Space through Community Partnerships

The funded per square footage rate should equal the actual cost of operating space in the board divided by total square footage.

Northern growth plan only discusses post-secondary education; it should include elementary and secondary education.

Model collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Municipal Affairs and Housing to enhance communication between trustees and councillors to allow better understanding of school board funding realities.

Community partnerships in existing school facilities require additional costs which are not funded and which are difficult for non-profit partners to fund.

Adult and continuing education should be recognized in terms of use of excess space.

There needs to be a comprehensive financial plan that goes beyond simply selling surplus properties to enable boards to lease excess space or to share excess space with other community partners.

Boards have made progress bringing childcare services into schools, but there is a financial disincentive to sharing school space. Square footage occupied by community partners is removed from capacity for school operations grant purposes, yet the same amount of money cannot be generated through lease agreements. The disincentive can be removed by allowing boards to net lease/rental revenues with the operations grant for the applicable space so that, while they are no further ahead, they are not operating at a loss – OR, community partners can be funded at a level that allows them to cover real costs of occupation. Moving into broader community partnerships (other Ministries/municipal partners) brings with it new concerns over safety and security of students and there needs to be latitude and financial support to address this.

Community's Need for Green Space

Preservation of green space is a broad municipal issue and it should not fall on school boards to supply and support green spaces within communities. If school boards are expected to keep green space for community use, then the municipality needs to pay for the green space. This is another area for collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Municipal Affairs and Housing.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability and Reporting Mechanisms for LOG and Safe Schools Supplement

Ministry should fully fund such costs as collective agreements, supply staff costs and other mandates; this will support less reliance on LOG and Safe Schools Supplement to offset the gap between funding and actual costs.

Reduction in board administration is not consistent with increasing reporting requirements.

Enveloping LOG and the Safe Schools Supplement

The enveloping of these grants would further reduce local flexibility in dealing with unique local cost drivers and funding gaps in other areas of the funding model.

Streamlining Reporting Requirements

Reduce Ministry of Education administration – which has increased substantially and created a cycle of financial reporting that does not add value to the quality of education provided in schools. Better balance between reporting and actual information needs.

It is time for internal review of Ministry processes to reduce duplication in reporting.

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Boards require more flexibility for local allocation of funds based on local determination of student needs.

Need to keep working to find the balance between the funding involved and the reporting required. The reports required for EPO grants are very detailed and extensive and whether the EPO grant is large or very small, the same work is required to track how the grant is managed.

SHARING SAVINGS

Potential Areas of Re-investment

Require a broad-based and open dialogue about the future of community infrastructure funding, including schools. Discussion needs to include the Province, the Ministry of Education, municipalities, local school boards, community groups and the private sector.

Priority Areas of Re-investment

Capital renewal investments and information technologies.

SCHOOL FACILITY OPERATIONS AND RENEWAL GRANT

Current Grant Structure versus the On-the-Ground Reality

Operating cost of empty spaces is the same as those filled with students.

Cost to deliver services in the north is higher due to attracting skilled workers to remote areas.

Encouraging Boards to Make More Efficient Use of School Space

The Ministry should share its assumptions about the cost drivers and thresholds used in the grant.

School boards could then compare operating costs to the benchmarks and would be better informed in terms of discussing any modifications to the benchmarks.

SCHOOL FOUNDATION GRANT

Current Grant Structure versus the On-the-Ground Reality

The salary and benefit benchmarks do not match the actual costs of salary and benefits in the terms and conditions within collective agreements and other comparable agreements.

Elementary and secondary schools located in one building are funded as one school with no consideration of location of offices within the building and the public desire to keep students separated.

Structure of the Grant to Make More Efficient Use of School Space

The need for school administration is not linked to the numbers of sites, but to the number of students in schools. The top-up allocation is the method of encouraging school boards to reduce used space. Reducing the school administration allocation further has an impact on capacity for oversight and could place student safety and academic achievement at risk.

Opportunities to Foster the Development of Senior School Administration

Recognizing the importance of a vice-principal role in a school is a key factor in the development of an experienced pool of staff who can undertake senior school administration.

Reductions in school foundation grant would further limit opportunities for mentoring and providing hands-on experience for administrators, at a time where recruitment to those positions is becoming increasingly difficult. Succession planning remains an issue for school administration.

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DECLINING ENROLMENT ADJUSTMENT (DEA)

Current Grant Structure versus the On-the-Ground Reality

The DEA does not fully take into account fixed costs which cannot be adjusted over time (eg.IT costs, insurance, building maintenance).

Costs of maintaining schools do not disappear when students leave.

Declining enrolment grant, although updated, serves the intended purpose. It is difficult to adjust to significant decline in a shorter time-frame that what is currently supported (3 years). Although enrolment numbers continue to level out on a provincial level, this does not translate automatically to specific locations to ease the burden of significant declines in enrolment. Over time, as enrolment levels out in more areas – this grant should become unnecessary.

Balance Between Supports for Declining Enrolment and Efficiencies

Consideration of long term enrolment trends (10 years) need to be considered. It is difficult to adjust costs in the short term without planning for anticipated increased enrolment in the longer term that will require reinstatement of processes and infrastructure.

Structure of the Grant versus Current Realities

Explore the development of shared administrative services through regional service hubs in the areas of payroll, accounting, purchasing.

Impact of New Board Administration Funding Model on DEA

The challenge with the Administration allocation is that it assumes an even progression of supports based on enrolment. The reality is that if you look at any sector, there are incremental steps at certain sizes of organizations within the sector where costs structures and efficiencies change.

GEOGRAPHIC CIRCUMSTANCES GRANT

Need a clear definition of what constitutes an urban centre.

Should consider the time that students spend travelling on buses.

Should consider distance between schools and board office.

No consideration of road conditions.

2015-16 GSN CONSULTATION

OPSBA would like to bring to the attention of the Ministry of Education some additional comments and concerns with respect to the funding model.

School boards would appreciate an **early announcement** of the 2015-16 GSN to allow them to make effective local decisions.

OPSBA recognizes that in recent years the Ministry has reviewed and updated several components of the funding model such as board administration funding and special education funding. OPSBA continues to advocate for a **full review of the current funding model** involving consultation with all stakeholders to ensure that the model meets the needs of all students in the province.

OPSBA anticipates that any **collective agreements will be fully funded**.

Special education funding continues to be one of the primary areas of concern for our school boards. It continues to be important that the special education funding model demonstrate that it is taking into

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account the growing number of special education students in our schools. Many school boards continue to spend over the enveloped funding levels.

OPSBA recommends that the Ministry of Education continue its work in refining special education data collection.

OPSBA recommends that the Ministry of Education continue to monitor and track the impact of the 4-year phased in high needs amount to ensure adequate supports and services for all special education students. Boards are struggling with gains and losses in funding, as well as the lag between students with special needs being present in the classrooms and being captured under implementation of the Special Education formula. This is particularly noted in FDK.

Funding of **First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education** continues to be a priority.

OPSBA appreciates the efforts to ensure that additional funding (outside of the GSN) is provided in the context of an overall Board Plan for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education. It is also recognized that while the collection of demographic data through the voluntary, confidential self-identification policies in boards continue to grow, it is still not close to capturing the full range of information across all boards. In terms of the extra funding, there should be caution about not weighting funding too heavily towards data derived from self-identification until there is a more universal experience with school boards' ability to provide this data.

Funding for Native Students and Native languages is a specific issue that connects to the Grants for Student Needs. OPSBA has frequently heard from First Nations who have Education Services Agreements with school boards, indicating that it is illogical that Native Studies and Native languages are not part of the regular tuition fee but must be paid for by the First Nation over and above the cost of the basic tuition fee. This provision seems at odds with the intent and principles of Ontario's First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education framework and clarity is needed to address this anomaly.

In terms of provincial-federal relations, we would like to see Ontario continue to advocate for the resolution of inequities in federal education funding for First Nation communities.

A key priority for OPSBA continues to be advocacy for **children and youth mental health**, which aligns with the expectation for school boards of "promoting student achievement and well-being" and is strongly reflected in the Ministry of Education's renewed vision for education. OPSBA is strongly supportive of the government's continued implementation of the Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. OPSBA understands the need for an initial phased in implementation plan to support the full continuum of services for students and families that includes mental health literacy, promotion of positive social-emotional development, prevention of mental health problems, intervention services and clear pathways to care. It is vital to recognize that investing in children's mental health and well-being is an investment in Ontario's future sustainability and prosperity.

OPSBA recommends that the Ministry of Education continue to include in the GSNs or EPO grants provision for the multi-year phased-in approach to support a full continuum of mental health supports and services. OPSBA's submission strongly supports the various elements of the existing implementation plan and requests that the Ministries involved:

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- continue to provide funding to effectively implement Mental Health Literacy support K-12 incorporating training for all staff working directly with children and youth in schools;
- ensure that in year's 4-10 of the government's comprehensive strategy, the gains and funding for children and youth mental health are sustained and expanded as required;
- maintain the ASSIST coaching support to continue to support all school boards with mental health leads;
- provide funding support for school-wide promotion of positive social and emotional development to strengthen mental health literacy among children and youth themselves;
- provide a core of sustainable funding to Kids Help Phone for children and youth mental health
- provide an increase in the number of mental health workers and registered nurses in schools across the province especially in northern and remote areas;
- Continue to support Working Together for Kids Mental Health to all communities in the province.

Mental Health Literacy Support K-12 must continue to align with the Student Support Leadership Initiatives (SSLI) and climate work in each Board to continue to build a culture of caring for all students and to deepen local partnerships with mental health and health organizations to facilitate timely and responsive access to care. It is vital as well that mental health promotion be integrated into existing curriculum in addition to school-wide and community efforts to build resiliency in our students.

OPSBA released a document entitled ***A Vision for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age*** in 2013. This document was a call to action regarding the development of a provincial vision. OPSBA appreciated that this document became a resource to the development of the government's *Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario*. The Plan of Action in the *Renewed Vision* calls for a number of progressive steps including investment in the classrooms of the future, in innovative teaching practices and instructional methods enabled by technology, and in increasing opportunities for e-learning. In late summer the government announced its intention to invest \$150 million in learning technology 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.

Our GSN brief to the Ministry last year recommended this kind of action, backed up by funding, and we look forward to consultations with the school board sector on how an integrated funding model will reflect this commitment on the part of the government on a go forward basis. We would further emphasize that action and funding be based on a well-articulated vision rather than a "pilot project" approach and that the Ministry coordinate efforts with other Ministries to ensure an accessible, equitable technology infrastructure across the province.

The Ministry of Education should monitor **new legislation and regulations** for possible funding implications.

OPSBA continues to hear concerns from many school boards about **student transportation**. The concerns with respect to student transportation include transportation funding, consortia governance, consortia operation and procurement of transportation services. OPSBA is of the view that the concerns with respect to student transportation warrant the establishment of a working group to thoroughly review the concerns expressed by school boards.

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OPSBA continues to hear concerns from school boards about the need for capital funding in the sector. Additionally there are concerns about the current regulation regarding education development charges. We note the commitment to additional capital funding that is detailed in the mandate letter for the Minister of Education which details more than \$11 billion in capital grants over the next ten years. We encourage the Ministry to further consult with school boards regarding capital funding and review the current education development charges regulation.

Finally, we note the commitment in the mandate letter for the Minister of Education to work with other ministries to consult with stakeholders and develop a policy that supports the development of community hubs. The development of community hubs is a matter that is of significant importance to our school boards and OPSBA looks forward to being involved in this consultation and supporting the Ministry in the development of a provincial policy.