

OPSBA SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

January 16, 2025

To: Ernie Hardeman, Chair of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs
Vanessa Kattar, Clerk

Re: 2025 Pre-Budget Consultations

Dear Chair Hardeman and Members of the Committee:

Last November, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) provided its recommendations for education funding with a submission to the Ministry of Education. That document included funding requests that aligned with the Associations' key priorities and addressed specific questions posed by our ministry.

More recently, I had the pleasure to address the Standing Committee in person at its hearing held in Stratford, and other school board members in the province spoke about education funding issues at hearings in Sault Ste. Marie, Kenora, and Ottawa. We all share the belief that strong, predictable, and equitable education funding is a foundational factor in setting the conditions that promote and sustain improved student achievement and well-being.

However, providing these conditions is becoming difficult as an increasing number of boards are grappling with deficits, which poses significant challenges in preserving essential classroom resources.

Since 2018, when per pupil funding was \$12,282.44, we have seen a downward trend, particularly since the height of the pandemic. Adjusted for inflation, per pupil funding now stands at \$11,506.03, creating a gap of \$776.41 per student—marking the lowest level of funding in over a decade. With approximately 1.4 million students in our English public school system, this equates to a shortfall exceeding \$1 billion, further widening the funding gap in public education.

As the gap between the funding provided by the provincial government and the inflationary costs faced by school boards grows, it becomes increasingly challenging to avoid impacting the classroom experience of our students. It is vital to ensure that we preserve and enhance the quality of education our students, parents, and communities deserve.

Investing now in public education will provide essential support to keep schools thriving, benefitting our communities and fostering the success of every student. We urge the government to recognize the importance of financial sustainability and provide the funding necessary to ensure our public education system remains strong and effective.

Sincerely,



Kathleen Woodcock
OPSBA President

OPSBA Priority: Student Success, Equity and Well-Being

OPSBA promotes and advances high-quality, equitable, and inclusive learning environments to support student success and well-being.

OPSBA Recommends:

Mental Health and Well-Being

- Increased funding to expand access to meaningful mental health resources for students, parents, and caregivers, with consideration for diverse populations and those in priority neighborhoods. Enhanced in-school supports and summer programs will address mental health barriers that impact well-being and academic success. Additional investment in professional development and School Mental Health Ontario curriculum support for teachers is essential.

Increased Special Education Support

- Additional funding for positions, such as Educational Assistants (EAs), Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), and Child and Youth Workers (CYWs), is crucial for creating inclusive classrooms and effective learning environments. Boards also need support for creating and implementing plain-language policies around identification, placement and review committees (IPRC), individual education plan (IEP), and appeal processes to ensure accessibility for all families. Professional development is essential to enhancing educator understandings.

Expanding the Math Learning Partner Program

- Expanding this program to allow boards to address foundational math curriculum needs with a focused approach.

Alternative Discipline Approaches

- Increasing funding for non-punitive discipline strategies, as well as studies on attendance and discipline correlations, is necessary to foster engagement and retention, particularly for at-risk youth. Funding for early and consistent parent engagement within school communities is also required.

Community Partnerships and Extended-Day Programs

- Supporting the development of partnerships for before-and-after-school programs and childcare facilities, especially in underserved communities. These programs offer safe, engaging spaces and reduce long-term costs associated with youth disengagement. Funding for internet access in rural areas and permits for non-profit groups will allow for student success throughout the school year and summer.

Intertwining Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and Accessibility Standards

- Funding is needed for staff to implement policies that integrate Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) and *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) standards, addressing both human rights and accessibility.

Revised Definitions and Accessibility Standards

- Funding is required to implement consistent definitions across disabilities, aligning learning disability classifications with the new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) without favoring one type over others, as well as adopting the Accessible Canada Act's 2019 definition of disability. This approach requires funding to implement and maintain consistency across school boards.

Expansion of Black and Indigenous Graduation Coach Programs

- Funding to expand Black and Indigenous graduation coach programs to all boards. Provincial expansion of the programs should prioritize individuals skilled in collaboration, problem-solving, and with a strong understanding of systemic barriers facing Black and Indigenous students. Graduation coaches should have strong connections to the local communities of the schools they serve.

Dedicated EDI Roles, Data Collection, and Anti-Racism Training

- Funding to sustain roles and research dedicated to equity and anti-racism, particularly anti-Black racism and poverty. Supporting in-school EDI training within instructional hours will strengthen inclusive learning environments, offering all staff opportunities for professional growth and addressing OHRC recommendations around anti-Black racism in education and the Right to Read report. School boards also require funding to establish clear guidelines and timelines for data collection, ensuring consistent communication and accountability to enhance equity across all boards.

Human Trafficking Prevention Programs

- Protecting vulnerable students by investing in awareness initiatives, counseling, and targeted support services to build safer, supportive school environments.

Enhanced De-Streaming and Accessible Pathways

- Increasing funding for de-streaming programs, skilled trades pathways, apprenticeships, and interdisciplinary courses to provide accessible and equitable learning opportunities. A revised funding model is essential to support smaller class sizes in skilled trades and cover the costs of specialized supplies. Additionally, funding is needed to ensure widespread and consistent internet access, particularly in rural areas, to strengthen access to these specialized skill areas.

OPSBA Priority: Local School Board Governance

OPSBA supports the role and leadership of local, democratically elected school boards in Ontario's English public education system.

OPSBA Recommends:

Professional Learning for Trustees

- Annual funding for OPSBA to deliver governance training to Chairs, Vice-Chairs and all trustees in collaboration with the Ministry of Education's Education Equity and Governance Secretariat. These opportunities should be co-developed to ensure maximum reach and success and consider content, presenters/facilitators, timing, and method of delivery.
- Funding for the Ontario Education Services Corporation (OESC) to refresh existing PD modules and further develop new modules that will build skills and knowledge to address current and future challenges facing boards. (i.e., EDI, Artificial Intelligence [AI], Risk Management)

Implementation of the *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act*

- Funding school boards for the costs incurred as a result of new requirements set out in the *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act* and Regulations. This includes the use of Integrity Commissioners, external consultants that are required to be used as part of the Director Performance Appraisals, and the costs to boards for use of mediators or legal counsel during informal code of conduct breach investigations

Supporting Healthy Local Democracy

- Funding for school board/trustee associations to create resources leading up to the 2026 Municipal Council and School Board Elections. Resources and engagement in communities across Ontario would:
 - promote and increase the awareness for the role of democratic locally elected school board trustee (and their contribution to public education and thriving communities)
 - encourage skilled, diverse, passionate individuals to consider becoming a trustee candidate
 - increase overall voter turnout for municipal and school board elections

OPSBA Priority: Truth and Reconciliation

OPSBA develops and strengthens relationships to facilitate access to programs, resources, and supports for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students that reflect the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.

Truth and Reconciliation

Reconciliation will not happen in absence of Truth. Indigenous communities are diverse nations with unique and distinct cultures, languages, histories, and experiences.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Core education funding for Indigenous education needs to be enveloped and protected for the uses for which they are intended. There must also be a means to transparently track these allocations.
- Developing educational programs and initiatives that honour the diversity of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit perspectives, voices, and experiences, and the needs of the communities local to each school board.
- Mental health supports, to allow schools to connect Indigenous students with culturally relevant service providers.
- Education assessments (to identify special education needs) of students transitioning between First Nation and provincial school boards.
- Cultural awareness training for education staff, because increasing the cultural awareness of education staff positively impacts the success of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students.
- Culturally relevant access to skilled trades and apprenticeship pathways that allows for the participation of on-reserve First Nation students.
- Developing culturally relevant skilled trades and apprenticeship pathways.

Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages, because of harmful colonial legislation, are at a critical state and urgent action is required to ensure survival in the next generation. Indigenous cultures, ways of being, and worldviews are embedded in each language. Canada, Ontario, and the Ministry of Education have articulated commitments to Truth and Reconciliation. Resources to support Indigenous language revitalization, and innovations that encourage language revitalization, are urgently required.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Hiring and retaining Indigenous Language Teachers
- Implementing an alternative process that facilitates certification of Indigenous language teachers.
- Flexibility in Indigenous language funding that allows for boards to develop innovative, localized approaches to language revitalization.

Prioritizing Indigenous Voices in School Board Governance

Indigenous trustees and Indigenous student trustees provide critical input in school board governance. Indigenous student trustees are the leaders of tomorrow.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Professional development funding/cultural awareness training and support for trustees and education leadership.
- Supporting Indigenous student trustees to network as peers and build their skills and capacity as future community leaders.

Indigenous Staffing

The success of Indigenous students is improved when Indigenous staff are visible and active in their schools.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Hiring and retaining First Nations, Métis, and Inuit teachers and administrators
- Hiring and retaining Indigenous Language Teachers
- Hiring and retaining Indigenous Graduation Coaches
- Hiring and retaining Indigenous education student support staff

OPSBA Priority: Effective Relationships and Sustainable Resourcing

OPSBA works with members, partners, the government and federations/unions to ensure that fiscal and human resources match school board needs and priorities.

Student Transportation

Service interruptions (cancellation and delays) and modifications to walk distances (that changed eligibility) have led to an increase in student absenteeism, a lack of consistent learning, and connections to the school community. This has become an equity issue, seen especially in the North.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Extending the transition funding period (that is to end in 2026) to allow boards to adjust to the new formula, achieve some stability, and collect data on any gaps. Further, that the ministry continues to actively work with boards to collaboratively address the gaps produced by the formula.
- Actively working with school boards and their transportation consortia to get a full understanding of contract costs and negotiated increases. We have seen recently the impacts felt by contract issues in both the Ottawa-Carleton DSB and Renfrew County DSB and as transportation contracts expire and are renegotiated, similar service disruptions will likely be seen in other areas. Transportation contracts must be fully funded.
- Committing to increased funding to attract and retain qualified and certified school bus drivers.
- Providing additional funding supports to address the unique challenges faced by our Northern and rural and remote school boards. These include:
 - Severe weather
 - Lack of Infrastructure (sidewalks, cross walks, lighting, etc.)
 - Lack of service providers
 - Lack of available municipal transportation
- Providing additional funding for transportation consortia operations.

School Facilities and Capital

Safe and accessible schools need to be built and maintained to accommodate future population growth to support student achievement and well-being.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Regularly releasing sufficient Capital Priority project funding on a consistent planning cycle to accommodate population growth.
- Increasing capital funding benchmarks to reflect the actual cost of construction (increases related to supply chain/material shortages/labour shortages).
- Investing in green building, repair, and renewal, that is planned, built, and operated to reduce emissions both during construction and throughout the operational lifespan of the school.

Cyber-Security and Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The increasing threat of cyber security is a high risk for school boards and to mitigate the risk requires a significant initial and ongoing investment. Coupled with this is the emergence and ever-changing nature and capabilities of AI.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Providing funding directly to offset cybersecurity costs and collect data from school boards to inform a provincial standard for school cyber security.
- Working with school boards and experts on the development of policies on the use of AI in schools, by staff, and students.
- Fully funding any requirements from the passage of Bill 194, Strengthening Cyber Security and Building Trust in the Public Sector Act, 2024 where school boards have been identified as public sector entities.

Replacing Absent Staff

A significant area of underfunding continues to be the increasing cost of supply staff. School boards struggle to cover the actual cost of replacing absent staff.

OPSBA Recommends:

- Working with school board/trustee associations to review board data and provide benchmark funding to cover the actual cost of replacing absent staff.
- Committing to funding and resources to support expectations for school boards set out in PPM 171 – Attendance Support Programs.

Specific Policy and Regulation Changes

In addition to the funding recommendations identified above, there are specific actions that can be taken by the Ministry of Education to address funding inadequacies and allow school boards to be even more fiscally responsible and support public education. These include:

- Lifting the moratorium on school closures with exceptions for remote and rural schools.

- Removing the rate cap on Education Development Charges (EDC) to allow the rates to accurately match actual land purchase costs as highlighted in school board EDC background studies.
- Providing compensatory funding to match federal current and future Canada Pension Plan and Employment Insurance Contribution rates.
- Providing public schools boards with exemptions from the *Planning Act* around site plan approval and the planning provisions of the *City of Toronto Act*, and any applicable/corresponding changes considered in the *Municipal Act*. (This exemption will allow school capital projects to move more quickly and provide a streamlined approval process, similar to what is given to public colleges and being considered for universities.)
- Repealing Ontario Regulation 406/18: Compensation Framework under the Broader Public Sector Accountability Act (BPSAA) to restore the previous framework, which allowed for increases to compensation for senior executives in order to mitigate the risk of wage compression/inversion in school boards.

National School Food Program – Implementing the Ontario Agreement

Now that the Ontario agreement has been announced, OPSBA as an endorser, will be coordinating our advocacy efforts with the Coalition for Healthy School Food. We are requesting that the provincial government increase its funding support for Student Nutrition Programs to align with other national provincial/territory per capita contributions. In addition, we are specifically seeking implementation support to:

- Ensure there is adequate space and infrastructure (including equipment) is in place to meet local health unit guidelines for food storage and preparation. Ensure adequate spaces for student to receive food, sit and eat.
- Funding for certified food program staff – for prep, serving and cleaning. Cannot and should not rely on volunteers.

Ontario Public School
Boards' Association

