

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
Submission to

Declining Enrolment Working Group

November 7, 2008



Ontario Catholic School
Trustees' Association



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Trustees' Association

OUR MISSION

Inspired by the Gospel, we provide leadership, service and a provincial voice for Catholic School Boards in promoting and protecting Catholic education.

OUR VISION

In keeping with our Mission, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association:

OPERATIONAL VALUES

- **Embodies** and promotes the values and traditions of our Catholic faith in all Association activities.
- **Respects** the principles of democratic and accountable governance.

POLITICAL ADVOCACY

- **Protects** the constitutional right of the Catholic community to govern, control and manage Catholic schools.
- **Promotes** education in our province that reflects the Catholic principles of social justice.
- **Advocates** for government recognition of the distinctive nature of Catholic education.
- **Advocates** for provincial policy, legislation and funding support that enable Catholic boards to provide quality Catholic education.
- **Influences** the strategic and political direction of the Ontario government and opposition parties regarding issues that impact Catholic education.

INFORMATION & SERVICES

- **Provides** faith formation and professional development resources and opportunities for its members.
- **Provides** to member boards information and services that recognize their diverse circumstances and needs.

COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC RELATIONS

- **Develops** effective structures that enhance communication and working relationships among OCSTA and its member boards.
- **Communicates** with member Boards and Catholic partners regarding relevant educational issues and OCSTA activities.
- **Promotes** public understanding of and support for Catholic education.
- **Celebrates** and **highlights** Catholic education's significant and continuing contribution to Ontario society.

PARTNERSHIPS

- **Stimulates** ongoing visioning of how Catholic education partners can collaborate to serve the interests of Catholic education.
- **Builds** significant partnerships within and beyond the Catholic community in support of Catholic education.

The Ontario Catholic Schools Trustees' Association (OCSTA) is appreciative of the opportunity to make representation to the Declining Enrolment Working Group. The issue of declining enrolment is of concern to the vast majority of our school boards and OCSTA is pleased to submit a number of priorities for the consideration of the Declining Enrolment Working Group, Ministry staff, and the Minister.

Foster School Improvement

As changes are made to reflect the declining enrolment trend in the Province, the first priority would be that improved student performance and school achievement levels must be nurtured and enhanced. This must be a priority consideration for any alteration to the grant structure, approach to partnership or any endeavour that arises as a result of enrolment decline.

Respect for School Systems

The Publicly-funded elementary and secondary education in Ontario is offered by four distinct school systems, each with its own mandate and mission. The English-Public, English-Catholic, French-Public, and French-Catholic school boards contribute to the success of the education of more than 2 million students in the Province. It would be absolutely essential that there be respect for each other's mandate in the interest of continuing to provide quality education to the students of the Province.

The support of the Minister in encouraging the four publicly-funded systems to work collaboratively in an environment of mutual respect will greatly assist all school boards in facing the challenge of declining enrolment.

Adequacy of Funding

In an era of declining enrolment, there would be a tendency to assume that the overall costs of education would also decline. Funding, however, must be based on many criteria, not just the number of students. There are continuing pressures associated with the general rate of inflation, the cost of school supplies, demand for new technology, salaries and benefits, utilities, capital costs and building maintenance. The provision of a clean safe learning environment has costs that don't necessarily drop in relation to the number of students. It would therefore be a priority that funding levels remain adequate to meet ongoing costs as well as to allow for program enhancements to meet the needs of students.

Equity and Perceptions

Although a comprehensive review of the funding formula is not anticipated before 2010, the work of the Declining Enrolment Working Group will undoubtedly result in recommended changes to the declining enrolment grant provisions and possibly others. Those recommendations that result in changes to the funding formula must treat all boards in an equitable manner. It has been pointed out that the declining enrolment portions of the funding formula are complex, perhaps overly so. As a forerunner to a broader funding review, the amendments to the declining enrolment grant must be transparent. The equitable treatment of all school boards and a perception of fairness, are priorities of OCSTA.

Provincial Funding

OCSTA firmly endorses the model that has been in place for ten years, namely that allocations to school boards from the Province is the source of revenue for boards. Any move towards a local levy is retrogressive and would be adamantly opposed by OCSTA. It must be noted that OCSTA is looking forward to the full review of the funding formula and is firmly committed to the principles of adequacy and equity. A move to any level of local taxation is seen as being totally inconsistent with these principles.

Partnerships

There have been many examples of successful partnerships at both the provincial and local levels. Provincial examples would include the Catholic School Boards Services Association (CSBSA), the Ontario Educational Services Corporation (OESC), and the Ontario School Boards Financing Corporation (OSBFC).

These partnerships have benefitted, in one way or another, almost every school board in Ontario. In addition, there are numerous examples of local consortia, purchasing co-operatives, and joint ventures that have been beneficial to school boards in terms of efficiency and cost effectiveness.

OCSTA continues to endorse the concept of partnerships and is open to new opportunities during a period of declining enrolment. In determining the viability of any proposed partnership, OCSTA would use the following criteria to assess its merit:

1. That denominational rights of Catholic schools be respected
2. That any sharing agreement be entered into voluntarily and without penalty
3. That identity and character of the Catholic school community be preserved
4. That school board autonomy be maintained
5. That the Catholic school community and local parishes be involved in the early stages of the consultation process
6. That the sharing of facilities enhances opportunities for improvement of learning opportunity for students

Financial Incentives

The funding model in its present form is a pressure driven model. It is meant to provide sufficient funding to ensure an effective publicly funded system while also ensuring that school boards strive for efficiency and accountability in terms of meeting their fiscal responsibilities. OCSTA accepts this approach but would, however, oppose a model based on the use of financial incentives to force participation in a partnership which is inconsistent with the criteria previously mentioned. The imposition of a partnership based on penalties for non participation would challenge the autonomy of school boards. Experience has shown that the most successful partnerships have been initiated locally, developed cooperatively, and been entered into voluntarily. A “carrot and stick” approach based on financial incentives or penalties would not be viewed as constructive in assisting school boards facing the challenge of declining enrolment.

Financial Gain

As partnerships are pursued as one response to declining enrolment, it would be a priority of OCSTA that there would be a quantifiable financial gain. Such arrangements are not restricted to school boards, but may involve hospitals, municipalities, or other publicly-funded organizations. In ideal relationships, all participants would gain in one way or another.

Student Safety

It would be a priority of OCSTA that schools remain as safe, clean, and healthy environments. The traditional school environment has been designed to ensure the safety of students. As changes are made in response to declining enrolment, there can be no compromise to the concept of a safe school. In the event that other adults are on school property as a result of a partnership, the agreements must contain the necessary safeguards to maintain a safe learning environment.

In summary, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association appreciates the opportunity to provide meaningful input into the process. In identifying certain priorities of the Association, it is the intent of OCSTA to convey to the Declining Enrolment Working Group those items, which if fully considered during the review, will facilitate a smooth implementation process in the months and years ahead.

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
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P.O. Box 2064, Suite 1804, 20 Eglinton Avenue West, Toronto, Ontario M4R 1K8
Tel: 416-932-9460 Fax: 416-932-9459 Email: ocsta@ocsta.on.ca Website: www.ocsta.on.ca