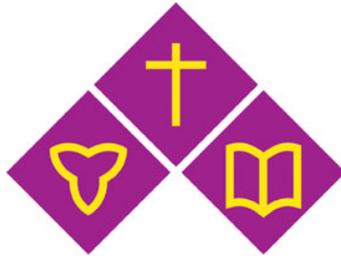


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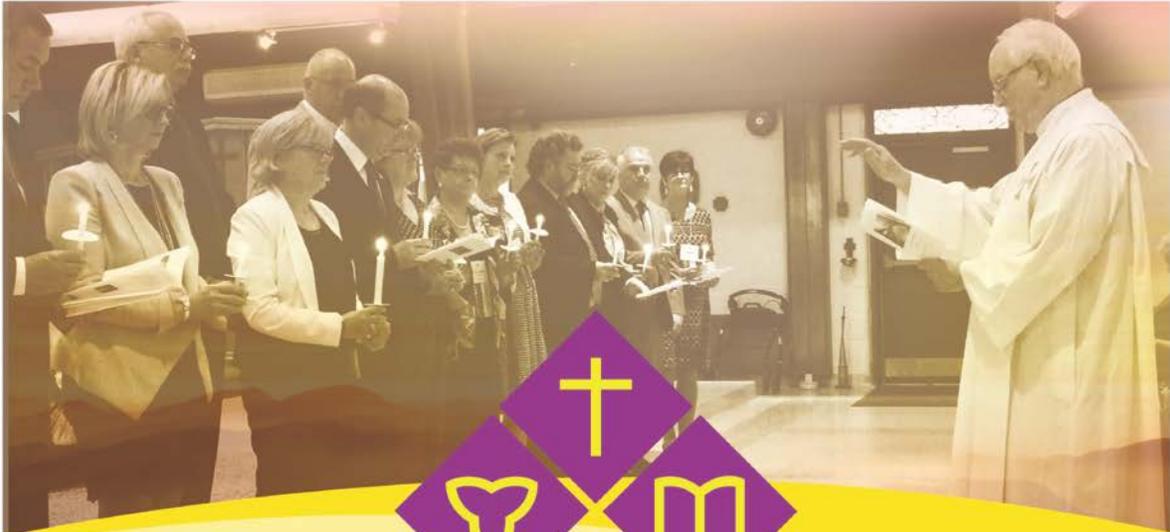
The Minister of Education

**Supporting Students and Communities:
Ontario's Rural Education Strategy**

June, 2017



Ontario Catholic School
Trustees' Association



Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association

Mission Statement

Inspired by the Gospel, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association provides the provincial voice, leadership and service for elected Catholic school trustees to promote and protect publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario.

Vision Statement

Ontario is enriched by a publicly funded Catholic education system, governed by locally elected Catholic school trustees who serve with faith, commitment and compassion.

Introduction

On behalf of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association ("OCSTA") we are pleased to provide you with our submission on "Supporting Students and Communities: Ontario's Rural Education Strategy". The recommendations contained within this report reflect extensive consultations with our rural Catholic school boards.

The Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) was founded in 1930. It represents 237 elected Catholic trustees who collectively represent 29 English-language Catholic district school boards. Collectively, these school boards educate approximately 550,000 students from junior kindergarten to grade 12 and adults in continuing education programs province-wide.

Inspired by the Gospel, the Mission of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association is to provide leadership, service and a provincial voice for elected Catholic school trustees who seek to promote and protect publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario.

Context for the Rural and Remote School Consultation

At the present time, Ontario's Catholic school system is comprised of roughly 1,300 schools—1,130 elementary schools and 219 secondary schools with a total student population of approximately 550,000 students. Of that, roughly 300 are "rural" Catholic schools,¹ that is, elementary schools where the next closest elementary school of a board is at least 20 km away and secondary schools (or combined elementary and secondary schools) where the next closest school of the board is at least 45 km away.² In Ontario, according to the Ministry of Education, about 15% of all students are enrolled in rural publicly-funded schools.³

The challenges faced by rural and remote school boards have been noted in several key government task force reports over the past 17 years. The "*Education Equality Task Force*" ("Rozanski Report, 2002") and the "*Strengthening Education in Rural and Northern Ontario Report*" ("Downey Report, 2003") each noted the specific funding challenges facing rural, northern and remote schools across Ontario in the context of declining enrollments and shifting demographic patterns.

¹ In 2003, it was estimated that 770 publically funded schools were in rural Ontario (Downey, 2003 p.7). However, in 2004, the Ministry of Education (September 22, 2004: B17) broadened the definition using Statistics Canada—that is population living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres having a population of 10,000 or more) or schools for which the second character of their postal code is "0". The revised estimate was 1,149 rural schools.

² These criteria define the tiers of funding for differentiated support for school administration as part of the School Foundation Grant contained with the 2017-18 GSN Technical Paper p.31.

³ See <https://www.ontario.ca/page/consultation-ontarios-rural-education-strategy>.

These reports also noted the issues associated with closing rural and remote schools:

- Transporting students to the next school over unacceptably long distances and travel times;
- Impacts on the culture and social role of small schools in the communities they serve;
- The loss of a key public institution that serves as a focal point for community activity
- The economic impacts on the local community.

The Declining Enrollment Working Group in 2009 noted that the decline in school age children was 68,000 in 2007-2008 or 3.4% and with further declines on the horizon. In addition, in terms of regional breakdowns, the Working Group showed that rural and northern boards would face more significant enrollment declines between 7-13%.⁴ At the present time, however, enrollment has stabilized for the short term due to the introduction of full day Kindergarten.⁵

The policy responses to these challenges have ranged from top up funding for rural and northern schools through the Geographic Circumstances Grant, school consolidation among coterminous boards, partnership agreements around shared services and facilities; school board cost efficiencies and community hub arrangements. The Declining Enrollment Work Group report, for example, contains 21 recommendations designed to address student enrollment declines while ensuring high quality educational programming. The recommendations include:

- Developing more comprehensive multi-year enrollment planning models
- Shared use of school facilities
- Community partnerships for underutilized schools
- Funding formula reviews and transition funding
- The broader use of information technology to support student learning.⁶

OCSTA has made several recommendations to the Ministry of Education over the past several years consistent with the policy responses outlined in the Rozanski Report, Downey Report, the Declining Enrollment Work Group Report, among other policy and funding consultations. For example, OCSTA outlined its support for community partnerships in its November 2008 submission to the Declining Enrollment Working Group and the need for adequate funding to assist rural Catholic school boards in managing capital and operating costs.

The Ministry of Education's current discussion paper, *Supporting Students and Communities: A Discussion Paper to Strengthen Education in Ontario's Rural and Remote Communities* (May 2017 "discussion paper") outlines many similar challenges and some of the same policy options facing Ontario's rural school boards. As it states in the introduction:

The education system has experienced declines in school-aged children for more than a decade—a challenge that school boards and communities have continued to address over the years through difficult conversations about school consolidations. In some small

⁴ Planning and Possibilities: The Report of the Declining Enrollment Working Group, 2009 p. 8-9

⁵ Supporting Students and Communities: A Discussion Paper to Strengthen Education in Ontario's Rural and Remote Communities (May 2017, p.3).

⁶ See Appendix A: Summary of Recommendations, p. 51-52.

towns and villages, the school is the last remaining public building. But under-enrolled schools can limit student opportunities, including course options and student supports.⁷

The discussion paper outlines several policy themes that will guide the Ministry of Education's deliberations on ensuring students have access to an excellent education. These issues include:

- The sustainable use of school space in rural communities.
- Supporting decision making around school closures.
- Supporting quality education in rural communities.

A number of questions are asked under each of the themes listed above and OCSTA will structure its comments and recommendations in response to these questions.

Supporting the Sustainable use of School Space in Rural Communities

1. *What steps can the provincial government, municipal governments and community partners take to better support early and collaborative community planning to make the most of all public resources, including schools?*

One of the key challenges facing school boards in multi-year capital and accommodation planning contexts is fostering a collaborative relationship with local community groups and municipal governments. The Ministry of Education's *Community Planning and Partnership Guideline* requires school boards to hold public meetings with municipal and local partners to discuss potential planning and partnership opportunities is a good starting point, but a more focused and dedicated approach may be necessary. The Ministry should also support school boards in an open and transparent manner when local boards engage in pupil accommodation reviews.

Below are some suggestions to improve the relationships between the Ministry, school boards and local government which in turn will better support early and sustained collaboration between key local stakeholders.

- Establish (secure Ministry funding) for a senior executive lead staff position at each school board that can develop and coordinate an integrated multi-year planning framework in collaboration with provincial and municipal governments;
 - Identify key leading community partner groups that have sufficient human and financial resources to participate in school board, municipal and provincial planning processes;
 - Require (and not just "invite") the sharing of all relevant planning information from municipal governments with school boards. This could include land use plans, growth/official city plans and other data school boards require for long term capital and accommodation planning
2. *Where the will exists for community partnerships, what are the hurdles to effectively implement, and how can governments, school boards and partners work to overcome them?*

⁷ See page 3.

OCSTA supports the concept of partnerships and is open to new opportunities to structure new partnership agreements with local community groups and governments. There are many examples of successful community partnerships at the provincial and local levels. The Ontario Education Services Corporation and the Ontario School Boards Financing Corporation are two key provincial partnerships. There are numerous examples of local consortia, purchasing co-operatives, and joint ventures and child care facilities that have been beneficial to school boards. In the context of Catholic school boards, some hurdles for effective implementation are:

- Identifying compatible local partner organizations and initiatives.
- Sustainable funding for non-profit and local community groups.
- Ensuring the integrity of the Catholic education programs and the denominational rights of Catholic schools.
- Designating operational responsibilities between the community partner(s) and the school board.
- Managing collective agreements for unionized staff to ensure the delivery of services can be accommodated.
- Funding for any necessary capital retrofitting of school facilities to meet the needs of the community partner.
- Uncertainty related to government funding supporting local planning and implementation of service agreements.

Potential approaches to better manage these kinds of challenges could include:

- Provincial and municipal governments to develop a roster of non-profit and community groups that have sustainable funding sources;
- Ensure formal legal agreements between the parties are well defined with a dispute resolution mechanism or process in place;
- Create an inter-ministerial funding mechanism to provide community groups sustained operating and capital resources for the management of in-school community hubs.
- Developing more detailed case studies of success partnerships with shared facilities.

3. *What are the opportunities for school boards to share space in your area? What do you see as the obstacles?*

This question can be broken down into two parts: sharing of school facilities between coterminous school boards and sharing of space with community groups.

Sharing of School Facilities between School Boards

OCSTA recognizes that in some circumstances the sharing of facilities between coterminous School Boards presents opportunities to meet the needs of their students and local communities. Potential benefits include:

- Access to sufficient capital funding for new school construction.
- Access to facilities that each board could not finance independently.
- Access to sufficient number of students for each board to provide distinct programming and facilities within shared building.

OCSTA is supportive of shared facilities among school boards that maintain and promote the distinct mission of Catholic Education and reflect decisions determined at the local school board level. Autonomy and flexibility at the local level are crucial and a prerequisite for successfully shared used of school facilities

Sharing of space with Community Groups

One of the most significant challenges for shared space within underutilized schools in northern and rural Catholic school boards is the lack of sustainable funding for community-based partners. School boards seek out community-based and compatible partners (for example, youth centres, senior's centres) that can lease or rent the excess space in schools. However, many such groups lack long-term sustainable funding that cannot be absorbed into existing school board budgets. In addition, some small remote communities cannot support partnerships or community hubs in schools since there is no public transportation or parking and cannot be easily retrofitted for alternative purposes. In summary, the opportunities are very limited to share space in many rural and northern schools with compatible partners.

4. *What should the provincial government and school boards be doing to ensure that opportunities to co-operate are supported?*

Local school boards require the autonomy and flexibility to identify local partners and develop accommodation plans in respect of their excess school space. The Ministry of Education's *Community Planning and Partnership Guideline* is a useful resource to facilitate co-operation and collaboration among local service groups and local governments.

In addition, the Community Hubs Secretariat is currently establishing a "Capacity Resource Network" and electronic information hub that will support best practices in the development of community hubs and local partnerships. OCSTA is supporting and participating in this initiative.

Supporting Decision-making Around School Closures

1. *How can the Province best support a meaningful conversation about the impacts of schools on local communities and student well-being through the pupil accommodation review process?*

Catholic school trustees clearly recognize that decisions related to underutilized schools and possible school closures have a significant impact on their local communities, parish, students, families and local businesses. The loss of a Catholic school in a rural community may mean the loss of Catholic education in an entire region of the province. That is why Catholic school trustees direct their boards to develop comprehensive, sensitive policies and processes for conducting pupil accommodation reviews in full compliance with Ministry guideline (*Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline*, March 2015 "PAR Guideline"). It should be noted as well that accommodation reviews take place after other options are explored by school boards for managing underutilized space such as:

- Moving attendance boundaries and programs to balance enrollment
- Offering to lease space to a coterminous board
- Finding community partners that can pay the full cost of operating the underutilized space.⁸

The consolidation of Catholic educational programs with other public school programs with coterminous boards present additional challenges. The potential threat to Catholic identity and the overcrowding of schools are two examples in this context.

The current pupil accommodation review (PAR) process has recently been updated to reflect the concerns of many education, municipal and community stakeholders. The current PAR and modified pupil accommodation review process (MPAR) are adequate tools to guide discussions about the impacts of potential school closures. The provincial government can best assist school boards in this process by encouraging all parties to work together in the best long term interests of students. This will require, at a minimum, that the government ensure school boards have adequate resources and funding to conduct meaningful PARs and MPARs and the autonomy to respond to the needs of their local communities.

⁸ PAR Guideline, 2015 p.3.

2. *How can the Province ensure that the feedback from the community is given full consideration, and that this input is reflected in the review process?*

The current PAR and MPAR guidelines and processes requires significant community engagement. In fact, both the PAR Guideline and the *Community Planning and Partnership Guideline* require school boards to undertake long-term capital and accommodation planning, informed by any relevant information obtained from local municipal governments and other community partners. That information must be documented by school boards and shared among local stakeholders and be included in the initial staff report to trustees.⁹

Catholic school boards work co-operatively with municipal governments and local community groups and coterminous school boards to ensure that their concerns and recommendations are given due consideration in decisions related to school accommodation reviews. Catholic school boards actively seek out the views of key local stakeholders to ensure they are reflected in any final decision related to a school closure. The province can assist school boards through pro-active communication to municipalities and other local community groups about the requirements and opportunities that exist for input into the PAR and MPAR processes.

Supporting Quality Education in Rural Communities

1. *What is working well now to help students in small and rural communities have a positive learning experience and quality education? What could be improved?*

In terms of Catholic students' learning experience, what is working well is the close connection students have with their teachers, school, parish and local community. These factors, related to small rural schools, tend to lead to greater parent and student participation in school activities, improve attendance rates and increase graduation rates.¹⁰ In addition to these advantages, small schools tend to benefit students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and those with special needs.¹¹

Many rural communities have only one Catholic school which is often the centre of life-long learning, child-centred activities, and community and parish events for the Catholic community. These schools tend to foster a close identification with the school and broader community. This assists students in staying connected to their school which tends to have a positive impact on student achievement and well-being.

⁹ PAR Guideline, 2015 p.5. In addition, other requirements in the PAR Guideline outlines the role of the Accommodation Review Committee, local community/parent/stakeholder representation, public meetings, and how the final staff report must reflect feedback and concerns of the local community prior to any final school closure decision by the school board.

¹⁰ See People for Education "Declining Enrollment/School closing", 2012. Also see Sean Robertson "Declining Enrollment in Ontario: What can history tell us and where do we go from here?" (Canadian Journal of Education Administration and Policy, 164, 2014 p.22).

¹¹ See K. Leithwood and D. Jantzi, 2007 "Review of the Empirical Evidence about school size effects" p. ii. Report prepared for the Board of Education Regina School Division no. 4, Saskatchewan. Also see "School Size and the Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Student Achievement", C. Howley and A. Howley, (Education Policy Analysis Archives, vol. 12, 52, 2004.)

Catholic school boards take very seriously their responsibility to locate Catholic schools in a manner that meets the needs of the Catholic community. Catholic parents living in rural and remote communities have a constitutional right to choose to send their children to Catholic schools. For this right to be exercised, Catholic schools must be truly accessible either through close proximity or reasonable student transportation distances.

What needs improvement in small rural and remote schools to promote student achievement and well-being include:

- Increased access to professional support staff,
 - Specialist teachers to support different program needs,
 - Less emphasis by the Ministry on funding for K to 12 school facilities to the exclusion of funding for rural, Catholic elementary schools,
 - Respect for local board autonomy to select an organization model (with community input) that meets the needs of students without penalty,
 - Enhanced funding for broadband access to support e-learning and research¹², and
 - Renewed focus on key funding issues to support rural, remote school boards.
2. *How could the Province best recognize and address the unique funding needs of your region and community through the funding formula?*

Rural, remote and northern Catholic schools face unique challenges that the current GSN funding formula do not adequately recognize. For example, higher student transportation and construction costs and the lack of funding for specialist teachers and other professionals are serious challenges.

OCSTA recommends that the government immediately establish a task force to review the funding model, consult with key stakeholders including trustee associations and policy experts. The objective would be to make a set of comprehensive recommendations to address the unique funding challenges facing northern, rural and remote school boards. To begin to address some of the funding challenges, the Ministry of Education should consider:

- Restoring top up funding to the Geographic Circumstances Grant,
- Provide core funding for small schools in single school communities,
- Ensure school boards are not penalized for keeping small schools open in single-Catholic school communities.

¹² The Ministry of Education's Broadband Modernization Strategy represents a significant development in this area. Additional funds to support the Strategy's school board pilot projects should be explored.

Conclusion

OCSTA sincerely appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Ministry of Education's Rural Education Strategy and the Discussion Paper *Supporting Students and Communities: A Discussion Paper to Strengthen Education in Ontario's Rural and Remote Communities*. The issues facing rural education in Ontario and how best to support student achievement and well-being are complex and we value the government's initiative to consult with its education partners to find long-term solutions to these challenges.

As the voice of Catholic education in Ontario, OCSTA believes that local Catholic school boards and their elected trustees are in the best position to make decisions about school consolidation, community partnerships and educational programming that best serves the interests of students and the local community. This will be conducted collaboratively with local governments, coterminous school boards, the Province and various community groups.

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
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