

“Partners in Ontario’s Education Success Story”

A Brief to the Minister of Education

December, 2016



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.

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Introduction

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 545,000 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.

Annually, OCSTA submits a brief to the government with recommendations for improvements to the funding of education. Recommendations are made on the basis that the education funding system in Ontario must respond to four essential principles:

Equity: A funding formula must distribute education dollars equitably among all Ontario school boards and their students;

Adequacy: The level of funding for education must be adequate to ensure quality education for today's students;

Autonomy/Flexibility: The model must allow school boards the autonomy and flexibility in spending they require to achieve the distinctive goals of their system, and to meet local needs; and

Accountability: The educational funding model must include mechanisms that ensure the appropriate degree of accountability for all parties and transparent processes and reporting mechanisms to support efficient and effective use of educational resources for students.

The recommendations contained in this brief were approved by the members of OCSTA and are important issues to the Catholic school community in this province. We trust that the Minister of Education will consider our comments as part of the government's on-going commitment to consultation. As always, we would be pleased to meet with representatives of the Ministry to discuss any of the following items in more detail.

Information Technology Infrastructure

In October 2008 the Council of Senior Business Officials (COSBO) received a detailed report titled “K-12 Educational Network / Connectivity Study – Costing & Technical Analysis”. This report was commissioned by COSBO and funded by Effectiveness & Efficiency Initiative. Subsequently, this report went forward to Ministry for review and funding consideration, however no funding support was forthcoming in response to the report recommendations. In 2000, a portion of the Foundation Grant specifically allocated to support technology was reduced by \$25 million which has not been reinstated. Recently, Ontario Association of School Business Officials – IT Committee (OASBO) published “Manifesto for 21st Century Learning” which builds on the seminal report findings and recommendations of the (K-12 Educational Network report). In an October 21, 2016 memo to Directors of Education, the Ministry announced a Broadband Modernization Program: Wave 1 which aligns with recommendations outlined in the “Manifesto for 21st Century Learning”. The memo specifically states “The ministry is committed to supporting school boards to ensure that barriers to achieving adequate broadband connectivity are addressed. Wave 1 Broadband Modernization Program is the first step forward in a systematic, phased approach to closing the broadband connectivity gaps that schools may face and a key enabler to supporting student outcomes...”. OCSTA welcomes the announcement on Broadband technology and looks forward to working with the Ministry in identifying and supporting our Boards in implementing the initiative to ensure appropriate funding and resources are made available to fully implement Broadband Modernization.

In the past the GSN has not provided for any one-time funding of the foundation Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure for either academic or administrative purposes, which have a maximum life cycle of seven to ten years. Sufficient, ongoing, sustainable funding for the regular replacement and upgrading of ICT infrastructure is critical to boards in order to support today’s learning and administrative requirements.

During the recent GSN consultations the Ministry asked about the considerations for enabling digital education. The infrastructure needs of school boards has significant implications for enabling digital education but it is not possible to provide a fulsome overview in a brief. This needs to involve several areas of expertise and requires resources to develop a feasible long term plan.

Recommendation 1

- OCSTA recommends that the Minister of Education consult with OCSTA to ensure appropriate funding and resources are made available to fully implement Broadband Modernization.
- OCSTA recommends to the Minister of Education that the GSN allocation be adjusted to incorporate funding to support Board’s ICT Infrastructure needs.
- OCSTA recommends the Minister establish a taskforce to review issues related to digital education and technology infrastructure requirements.

Funding Formula Reform and School Board Budget Reductions

Over the last few years the province has implemented changes to certain education funding categories such as school operations, board administration and special education. These changes have been funding neutral provincially (a redistributive model) but had significant impacts on some boards. Some boards have benefitted seeing increases in grants but other boards have had significant reductions. One example of the impact of these funding changes is the Dufferin-Peel CDSB, which has realized reductions in school operations and board administration in the amount of approximately \$10M annually (after the phase-in is completed).

In addition, the government raised the issues of the compliance with the enveloping provisions of the School Board Administration and Governance Grant during the recent GSN consultations. OCSTA respects the restrictions of the GSN regulation but often the uses of certain components of the grant and some revenue offsets differ from board to board. Some clarity regarding these issues would be helpful provided there is also some flexibility as boards' needs differ.

Recommendation 2

OCSTA recommends that the Ministry of Education review the recommendations from the Board Administration and Governance Advisory Group (BAAG) and the redistributive impacts of the funding on boards, with a view to recognizing the administrative and governance requirements of large boards and adjusting funding that fully supports Board's administrative needs.

21st Century Programs and Services for Students with Differing Abilities Including Diverse Learning Needs

On May 4th, 2016, the Ontario government announced its intention to consult with its education partners on its Well-Being Strategy for Education in the fall of 2016. OCSTA's President and Executive Director were present at the launch of this initiative. This Well-Being strategy focuses on promoting:

- Positive mental health
- Safe and accepting schools
- Healthy schools
- Equity and Inclusive education.

To facilitate discussion, the government released a series of background documents and discussion papers that formed the basis of its consultations. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services released a revised autism strategy with additional funds for school boards in 2016 as well. This will include transition funds to support children in transition from ABA services to schools.

Recommendation 3

- That the Minister ensure that funding to Boards is on-going, equitable and sustainable for all including students facing mental health challenges and students experiencing a variety of transitions and challenges.
- That the Ministry conduct a funding review of other commitments including aligned supports for student identity, engagement, well-being, achievement, and voice for all learners with differing abilities.
- That the Ministry of Education continue to address the changing nature of student needs as evidenced in the need for on-going enhanced prevention/intervention and aligned staff professional development supports for students with mental health challenges in transition.

Special Education

In 2014, The Ministry of Education announced its intention to restructure the “High Needs Amount Allocation” of the Special Education Grant funding into a new formula called “Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount” in an attempt to address the variation among school boards with respect to their population of students with special needs and each school boards ability to support these needs. This new formula is being phased in over four years starting in 2014-15. During this four year phase in period, the Ministry has indicated that it recognizes the new formula will negatively impact some school boards and will therefore hold the provincial former “high needs amount” at \$1.5 billion during this four-year period. Catholic Boards have identified adequacy of special education funding as critical to their ability to deliver the range of services necessary to provide quality learning opportunities for special needs students.

Recommendation 4

- That the Ministry of Education limit the special education funding reduction that a board can face in any one year and/or multiple years under the new funding model.
- That boards be funded for demonstrated special education needs above and beyond the funding allocation based on the new funding allocation model.
- That the Minister establish a Special Education Working group to review the adequacy of funding, including the reformulated High Needs Amount and that OCSTA be participants in the working group.

School Bus Transportation

Many school boards are currently running significant deficits in funding student transportation. The Auditor General's 2015 Annual report addressed this issue in part in its review and recommendations on student transportation.

One of the central findings of the report is that the structure and funding of student transportation needs updating and it is not based on the needs of a school board. As the report notes, the funding model is based on a "historical amount - each boards' 1997 spending level with annual adjustments for enrolment and inflation, and other minor adjustments". The most important influences on a school board's student transportation costs are not factored into the model such as enrolment density, geography, the number of special needs students and safety hazards. In addition, the new competitive procurement process that school boards must follow in securing transportation has resulted in significant cost increases. In one case of a large urban transportation consortium, costs increased by roughly 18% which had to be absorbed by the affected school boards.

Recommendation 5

- That the Ministry of Education immediately review the student transportation funding formula and restructure it based on the actual needs of school boards.
- That the Ministry ensure that any recommendations that may have cost implications to Board's Transportation Allocations be reflected appropriately in funding.

Cost of Sick Leaves and Short Term Disability Leaves

School boards have stated that the cost of the sick leave and short-term disability leaves have increased significantly in the past few years. Sick leave costs represent a material expenditure of a school boards' annual operating budget. A 2014 survey of absenteeism shows that there has been significant increase in sick leave in a number of job classes. It is imperative that the Ministry review the increasing costs of sick leave and address the lack of adequate funding for these costs.

Recommendation 6

That the Ministry of Education increase funding to address the current and predicted costs associated with sick leave and short-term leave absenteeism.

Funding Issues with the Renewed Mathematics Strategy

On April 8, 2016 the Ministry of Education announced “The Renewed Mathematics Strategy” and funding model “is an Early Years to Grade 12 strategy that leverages the collective knowledge and skills from our shared successes of the past to focus on improving student achievement in mathematics” (Memorandum from Deputy Minister to all Directors of Education. According to the Memorandum, the strategy will provide new forms of support to all schools, increased support to some schools and intensive support to a select group of schools with the greatest needs in mathematics. The strategy will also focus on students with special needs and high school students taking compulsory courses in applied mathematics. The total amount of funding allocated to support the renewed math strategy is roughly \$53 million.

Some of the supports for school boards include:

- Dedicated blocks of mathematics instruction time;
- Teaching math lead teachers
- Professional support programs for teachers and principals
- Funding for facilitators and extra support for special education students.

The funding model is based on EQAO results in grades 3, 6, and 9 mathematics and information from students and board staff. Some flexibility is built into the model that recognizes the unique circumstances of some school boards, for instance, where a board has a shortage of occasional teachers or very small schools. Further, it is noted that “transfer payment agreements” will be made with each board based on their project funds to support the renewed Mathematics Strategy.

The funding model, however, is not equitable in respect of its impact on Catholic school boards. Generally speaking, Catholic boards have been achieving higher math scores as measured by EQAO tests and therefore receive less funding overall. In order to achieve the goals for mathematics knowledge, Catholic boards may have to allocate funds from other parts of the Grants for Student Needs and thus negatively impact student achievement in those non-mathematics areas.

The Mathematics Strategy, also may have program planning and assessment challenges. At this stage, it is not clear how teaching and learning practices are to be monitored in the classroom; furthermore, some of resources used by the Ministry to support teachers are out date and program requirements lack cohesion and consistency. Another challenge is the teacher training and hiring regulations. These present barriers to the implementation of the renewed Mathematics Strategy by making it difficult for school boards to find or hire the most qualified mathematics teachers available.

Recommendation 7:

- That the Ministry of Education provide EPO funding on an equitable basis to Catholic school boards to support the Renewed Mathematics Strategy;
- That the Ministry of Education collaborate with Catholic school boards to make funding adjustments to compensate for the erosion of funds for other program areas;
- Continue to Collaborate with school boards and other education partners to improve the Mathematics program and planning components and facilitate access to the most qualified mathematics teachers available.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

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Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
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