

Submission to
The Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Pre-Budget Consultation

January 18, 2018



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.

Background and Key Principles

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. Together, 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.

Now in terms of our core principles, we believe 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.

Key Areas of New and Additional Investment

1) Increased Flexibility/Autonomy

Since the late 1990's, with the structural changes to the funding formula for school boards, new rules and restrictions have been established that reduce school board flexibility and autonomy in meeting their local needs.

As part of an expanding list of programs and services, the ministry continues to reduce boards' flexibility and autonomy in designing and delivering these programs that meet local needs and conditions.

The ministry has also placed increased restrictions on how school boards spend their capital and operating funds. For example, the increased number of areas in the GSN that are "enveloped" reduces school boards' budget flexibility along with more targeted EPO grants.

These restrictions on school boards have reduced their capacity to plan for, fund and operate specific education programs that serve the unique needs of their local constituents.

OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the Ministry of Education develop new regulations/policies to restore school board autonomy and flexibility:
 1. In overall school board planning/program design and the implementation of ministry policy directives;
 2. Remove restrictions (enveloping) on operating funds that reduce school board flexibility.

2) Student Transportation

Recent proposed changes to the *Employment Standards Act, 2000* (“bill 148”) increases the minimum wage to \$14/hour on January 1, 2018 and by the end of 2019 \$15/hour.

Coupled with other costs associated with the proposed amendments in bill 148 including vacation pay, equal pay for equal work for part-time employees and increases in personal emergency leaves, school board budgets will face increasing pressures to meet existing program and service obligations.

Especially in respect of student transportation, these costs could be significant for school bus operators which will negatively impact school board transportation budgets.

Many school boards are currently running significant deficits in funding student transportation. The structure and funding of student transportation is not based on the needs of a school board.

The funding model is based on a “historical amount”—each boards’ 1997 spending level with annual adjustments for enrollment and inflation, and other minor adjustments. The most important influences on a school boards student transportation costs are not factored into the model such as enrollment density, geography, the number of special needs students and safety hazards.

In addition, the current competitive procurement process (RFP) 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% that had to be absorbed by the affected school boards.

OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the student transportation funding formula be restructured to reflect the actual financial needs of school boards;

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- That the Ministry of Finance provide sufficient and in-year funds to ensure that any new costs associated with the amendments to the Employment Standards Act that impact student transportation are reflected in annual adjustments to the education funding formula.

3) 21st Century Programs and Services for Students with Differing Abilities Including Diverse Learning Needs

a) Student Mental Health

Recent research from Centre for Addiction and Mental Health shows that roughly 328,000 children in grades 7-12 report moderate to serious psychological distress (2016).

The Provincial Centre for Excellence in Children and Youth Mental Health state that schools need to develop comprehensive mental health supports and strategies to address the growing challenge.

Rural and northern school boards face unique issues with fewer professional resources to support student mental health services. Boards need more financial resources to expand promotion and prevention programs at the elementary and secondary school level. Key program areas include: suicide prevention, anxiety issues, behaviour problems, addictions.

OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the Ministry of Finance expand funding for student mental health needs, while ensuring it is equitable and sustainable for all students.

b) Special Education

Currently 28 of 29 Catholic school boards are running deficits in special education funding and experiencing significant challenges in meeting the educational, psychological and support needs of its exceptional students. More sophisticated diagnostic techniques related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), have resulted in significant increase in identifying this segment of the student population and placed considerable additional demand on special education services in school boards.

In some cases, school boards are having their special education grant reduced due to phased in changes to a key part of the grant structure supporting high needs students.

This change has placed a significant strain on some boards and has resulted in inequities in the level of service provided to special education students.

OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the government establish a panel of experts with a stakeholder advisory board to review the adequacy of special education funding in Ontario;

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- That the government review “student needs based” funding models for high needs special education students to supplement the overall special education funding model.

4) Capital Funding

School boards capital requirements include the following:

1. Older schools need to be re-built;
2. Consolidation of schools due to declining enrolment and capital upgrades;
3. Deferred maintenance;
4. New school construction in boards’ growth areas.

The current situation would benefit from increased investments to deal with capital backlogs and a multi-year program to address capital planning needs.

These investments and programs would add an element of predictability to the system and would make it possible for school boards to plan and clearly articulate those plans to the Ministry of Education.

OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the Ministry of Finance provide Ministry of Education additional investments for capital programs
- Recommend to the Ministry of Education a multi-year capital funding process in order to restore the ability of both the Ministry of Education and school boards to plan for future capital needs.

5) Sick Leave Costs

The financial costs associated with the sick leave provisions contained within the central terms of our boards’ collective agreements are becoming an increasingly significant issue.

Cost increases associated with these provisions, combined with the indirect costs associated with replacement staff, are leaving many of our school boards struggling to meet obligations.

Additional funding to enable boards to build and maintain robust attendance support programs is required. Funding for absences attributable to the changes in the sick leave plan within the funding formula (GSN) must be adjusted to reflect actual costs and absence rates across all employee groups.

OCSTA Recommendations:

- That funding for illness absence within the funding formula (GSN) be adjusted to reflect actual costs and absence rates across all employee groups.

Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association
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