



Ontario Catholic School  
Trustees' Association

# **CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN ONTARIO**

## **KEY PRIORITIES AND POLICIES**

2018 PROVINCIAL ELECTION DISCUSSIONS



Founded in 1930, the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA) 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 Catholic school boards in promoting and protecting Catholic education.

Our core education funding principles are:

**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.



Below are OCSTA's key education funding and policy priorities, and sample questions to support discussions with candidates (pre-election) and MPPs (post-election).

## 1. SUPPORT FOR PUBLICLY FUNDED CATHOLIC EDUCATION

### Suggested Question

- Catholic schools are an integral and successful segment of Ontario's top ranked education system. Will you and your (PC/Liberal/NDP) party continue to maintain your strong support for publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario?

## 2. SCHOOL BOARD AUTONOMY AND FLEXIBILITY

Catholic district school boards in Ontario face increased budget pressures in the delivery of educational programs and services required by the Ministry of Education. 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. In addition, the ministry continues to reduce boards' flexibility in developing specific policies for students or implementing ministry policy directives.

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.

### Suggested Questions

- Will you and your party promote policies to restore school board autonomy and flexibility?
- For example, will you and your party reduce restrictions (enveloping) on operating funds that reduce school board flexibility.

## 2. STUDENT TRANSPORTATION

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 board’s student transportation costs are not factored into the model such as enrollment density, geography, the number of special needs students and safety hazards.

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. In addition, the current 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% and had to be absorbed by the affected school boards.

### OCSTA Recommendations

- That the student transportation funding formula be restructured to reflect the actual needs of school boards;
- That the competitive procurement process be restructured to restore school board autonomy and flexibility following the recommendations of the Campbell Report.
- That the Ministry of Education 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 GSN.

### Suggested Questions

- Will you and your party ensure that the student transportation funding formula is restructured to reflect the actual needs of school boards?
- Will you and your party restructure the competitive procurement process to restore school board autonomy and flexibility?
- Will you and your party ensure that any new costs associated with the amendments to the *Employment Standards Act* (Bill 148) that impact student transportation are reflected in annual adjustments to the GSN?

### 3. 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. In addition, with the legalization of recreational use of cannabis, many school boards anticipate greater demands on mental health resources and supports, with the potential increased use of cannabis products and accompanying impacts on student mental health and well-being.

#### OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the Ministry of Education ensure funding for student mental health needs is equitable and sustainable for all students.
- That the Ministry of Education continue to support funding of a board level “Mental Health Lead” into the Grants for Student Needs structure. We also encourage the government to monitor and update the financial supports to boards to support local mental health initiatives.
- That the Ministry of Education continue to address the changing nature of student mental health 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.

#### Suggested Questions

- Will you and your party ensure that the funding for student mental health needs is equitable and sustainable for all students?
- Will you and your party continue to support funding of a board level “Mental Health Lead” into the Grants for Student Needs structure?
- Will you and your party address the changing nature of student mental health needs? For example, the need for on-going enhanced prevention/intervention and for students with mental health challenges in transition.

### 4. SPECIAL EDUCATION

Currently 28 of the 29 Ontario Catholic school boards are running deficits in meeting the educational, psychological and support needs of their 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 led to increases in demand on special education services in Boards.

Additionally, with the introduction of full-day kindergarten and various social factors, school boards must reallocate funding between different program areas to ensure students receive the educational services and supports they require. In many cases, school boards are having their special education grant reduced due to phased in changes to a key part of the grant structure. The “high needs” amount of the grant is being replaced by the Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount (DSENA). This new model is composed of the Special Education Statistical Prediction Model (SESPM), Measures of Variability Amount (MOV) and Base Amount for Collaboration and Integration. This new grant structure has redistributive funding impacts across all boards, some gaining and some losing funding.

#### OCSTA Recommendations:

- That the Minister establish a Special Education Working group with a stakeholder advisory board to review the adequacy of special education funding, including the structure of the DSNEA.
- That the Ministry of Education review “needs based” funding models for high needs special education students to supplement the overall Special Education Grant structure.

### Suggested Question

- Will you and your party recommend a Special Education Working group with a stakeholder advisory board to review the adequacy of special education funding?

## 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. Currently, all employee groups are able to access up to 11 days payable at 100% and up to 120 days payable at 90%, for a combined total of, up to 131 paid days of sick leave per year. Cost increases associated with these provisions, combined with the indirect costs associated with replacement staff, occasional teachers, and increased administrative burdens associated with managing higher utilization, are leaving many of our school boards struggling to meet obligations.

While OCSTA continues to collect absenteeism data from its member boards, in 2016, SBCI conducted a study of 54 school boards (inclusive of certain Catholic, public, French Catholic and French public school boards) which highlighted the growth of average sick leave utilization across the sector as a whole and the associated financial magnitude of the problem. According to publicly available reports<sup>1</sup>, absenteeism rates have on average, risen from less than 9 days in 2010-11 to over 11 days in 2015-16, with an associated cost of approximately \$1.0 billion. Over the 2010-11 to the 2015-16 period, sick leave utilization grew significantly in every employee category:

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.therecord.com/news-story/7316863-jump-in-teachers-sick-days-affecting-students-report-warns/?S=E>

There can be little debate that the exponential growth in sick leave utilization is directly linked to the sick leave plan modification that was introduced to the sector in 2012. While attendance support programs are one tool to assist in curbing growing costs, these types of programs alone are insufficient to address the magnitude of the increase in utilization. Additional funding to enable boards to build and maintain robust attendance support programs is required. Government must also be committed to working with school boards and Trustee Associations to negotiate meaningful changes to the central sick leave collective agreement provisions. Failing this, funding for absences attributable to the changes in the sick leave plan within the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) must be adjusted to reflect actual costs and absence rates across all employee groups.

#### OCSTA Recommendations:

- That Boards be supported and funded by the Ministry of Education in implementing attendance support and disability management programs.
- That the Government work with trustee associations and school boards to negotiate meaningful changes to the central sick leave collective agreement provisions.
- That funding for illness absence within the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) be adjusted to reflect actual costs and absence rates across all employee groups.

### Suggested Questions

- Will you and your party ensure that school boards are supported and funded by the Ministry of Education in implementing attendance support and disability management programs?
- Will you and your party work with trustee associations and school boards to negotiate meaningful changes to the central sick leave collective agreement provisions?
- Will you and your party provide funding for illness absence within the Grants for Student Needs (GSN) be adjusted to reflect actual costs and absence rates across all employee groups?