



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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OPSBA Submission to *Consultation: Education in Ontario*

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) believes the participation of all education partners in the Ministry of Education's *Consultation: Education in Ontario* is of vital importance.

OPSBA encouraged and regularly promoted participation in the consultation to its membership. We also prepared an evidence-based resource document to support those who wanted to take part in one or all of the various options available to the public to provide input.

While we appreciate the consultation was open to the public, we do have concerns about how the input will be analyzed, weighted and evaluated. We support the validity of the viewpoints from all education stakeholders however, any curricular changes or modifications should be guided by informed and evidence-based practice.

It is with this expressed concern in mind that we now share our formal responses to the questions included in the government's consultation below.

If you are a member of a stakeholder group interested in Ontario's education system, please describe:

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) represents 31 public school boards and 10 school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA believes that the role of public education is to provide universally accessible education opportunities for all students regardless of their ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds, social or economic status, individual exceptionality, or religious affiliation.

How should we improve student performance in the disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)?

OPSBA strongly recommends that the acronym STEM be changed to STEAM to include the Arts as a key curricular area of focus. Fundamental competencies can be strengthened, expanded and reinforced through a strong Arts curriculum in addition to science, technology, engineering and mathematics to include the creative process, critical thinking, problem solving and empathy. (See [PISA 2018 Global Competence](#))

In an increasingly complex, integrated and globalized context we must prepare students for jobs/careers and technologies that may not yet exist. It is not just about recalling content knowledge, but applying that knowledge in relevant, engaging ways through the intentional development and integrated application of a range of competencies and skills. (See [Schleicher 2018](#))

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international study that measures trends in learning outcomes in science, reading, and mathematics for students at 15 years old. Ontario has consistently scored significantly above the OECD average and at or above the Canadian average on this assessment. In order to make informed suggestions for improvement, it is important to ensure the validity of EQAO assessments (i.e. questions, cultural bias implications, etc.) and why the results are so different than other assessments. As such, the government should inventory all evidence-based approaches in school boards to go deeper and replicate effective strategies provincially. It is important to build on effective instructional strategies and ensure adequate resources and professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Improving achievement in mathematics is complex and requires a multi-pronged approach, including, but not limited to, adequate resources, professional development, differentiated instruction to meet individual student learning needs, and time on task.

It is timely to revise and streamline the "crowded curriculum" and reduce the overall curricular expectations to allow for sufficient time for intentional and integrated competency/skill development and application related to mathematics, science, engineering and technology. Research identifies that project-based learning is an important instructional strategy to support STEAM curricular areas.

How should our schools prepare students with needed job skills, such as skilled trades and coding?

Skilled trades need to be universally recognized as a viable and respected pathway for all students. By 2025, there will be a skilled labour shortage of 1.2 million positions and 40 per cent of all occupations will be in the skilled trades.

This will occur with a backdrop of 48 per cent of the current workforce being eligible to retire in the next five years (OYAP, 2018). A targeted marketing and communications plan, specifically directed at parents, students and educators, is needed to elevate skilled trades to an accepted, respected pathway. This should include the evidence-based research and data that shows there are and will continue to be many opportunities for well-paid jobs in the future.

This is a career pathway that needs to be part of a comprehensive and intentional career exploration strategy from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The earlier students and parents are made aware of these types of career opportunities, the more likely there will be an actual increase in the supply pipeline for apprenticeships in the skilled trades. Waiting until students graduate is too late and negatively implies that these are careers that should be considered only if other pathways are not attainable. As a result, promotion and awareness of career options in the area of skilled trades should begin in elementary school. Opportunities for commencing various elements of an apprenticeship and the opportunity to earn hours towards an apprenticeship should begin in secondary school.

OPSBA urges the government to strongly consider providing relevant opportunities for students, beyond the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), to begin to earn apprenticeship hours while in secondary school, which can then be continued upon graduation with an employer or at the community college level. This will provide an early incentive for students to develop positive attitudes toward the trades, pursue an interest, develop a passion, and begin in a very practical way to learn about safety in the workplace. An apprenticeship focus can easily be expanded and integrated into existing vocational school programs and through secondary school experiential and co-operative education programs, as well as Specialist High Skills Majors. This will involve balancing and/or shifting funding levels for commencing an apprenticeship in secondary schools rather than only in post-secondary and employment settings.

OPSBA supported the amendments to the *Ontario College of Trades and Apprenticeship Act, 2009* contained in Bill 47 to remove any barriers for secondary and post-secondary students to secure apprenticeship positions in the various skilled trades upon graduation (e.g. issues related to ratios and staffing levels). Changing the ratio per journey person has been an excellent start.

Aligned with a competency/skills-based approach, instead of adding more discreet elements to an already crowded curriculum (e.g. coding), educators are continually looking for ways to integrate these types of topics into existing subject areas such as mathematics, science, etc., to make learning more current, relevant and applicable. In this way students are able to explore a variety of areas within existing curricula to identify and further explore and develop their interests and strengths. ([Monograph #69, 2017](#))

What measures can be taken to improve provincial standardized testing?

OPSBA released a [Discussion Paper](#) in December 2016 with seven key recommendations regarding EQAO and large scale testing in Ontario. This document had input from all school boards, who are committed to continuous improvement and student assessments are used as part of the evidence base to inform their strategic planning process. Student assessment helps to guide school board resource allocations, professional learning efforts, and provide valuable feedback regarding the impact of strategy implementation.

OPSBA does not support any expanded mandate for EQAO to include additional assessments of other subject areas or specific learning skills and competencies.

Prior to January 2013 and the introduction of [PPM 155: Diagnostic Assessment in Support of Student Learning](#), school boards had a number of “all student” diagnostic assessments in addition to EQAO. As a result of PPM 155, EQAO is now the only assessment of curriculum that is given to all students. If EQAO testing was eliminated or administered as randomized samples, school boards would lose a valuable tool to inform their planning. However, if PPM 155 was revised to have every elementary teacher assess all students twice a year, once in the fall to inform planning and instruction (as a baseline as students entered a particular grade to assess strengths, gaps and learning needs) and a second time in the spring (to assess learning), school boards would support a randomized approach to EQAO. This could realize a significant EQAO cost savings. Any results of these diagnostic assessments would not be made public, but would be used exclusively by the teacher, school, and school board to inform practice, planning and support for improved student achievement.

Improving communication to parents to clearly understand the purpose of EQAO, reducing anxiety for students during the administration of the assessment, removing cultural bias in questions and ensuring that EQAO data is not inappropriately used (e.g. in Fraser Institute school rankings) to negatively impact the reputation of schools and students would be important areas of improvement for the government to consider.

What more can be done to ensure students graduate high school with important life skills, including financial literacy?

A key life skill is resilience, which is inextricably linked to positive mental health and well-being. Ensuring supportive and nurturing learning environments that promote resilience sets the stage for improved academic achievement. For more than 70 per cent of adults with a mental health illness, the onset of difficulties occurred before 18 years old and up to 50 per cent of children and youth experience mental health issues that have a significant impact on academics/learning, relationships and family life (OCCYMH, 2010). In Ontario, 14 per cent of high school students report having seriously contemplated suicide

and four per cent have attempted suicide (See [CAMH's Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics.](#))

This means that early government investments in Kindergarten to Grade 12 school-based mental health is essential, will save lives and result in significant savings to our health care system as students progress through their life. In Canada, mental health has a \$51 billion annual economic impact linked to health care costs, loss of productivity and workplace absenteeism. The cost of a mental health disability leave is double the cost of a physical illness leave (CAMH).

School-based mental health is critical to a holistic approach to education. Every school board has a Mental Health Lead, and a mental health and well-being strategy that guides the approach and intentional work in schools. A full continuum of support in schools includes promotion of positive mental health, mental health literacy, social emotional learning, prevention, intervention, stigma reduction, suicide prevention, intervention and postvention and clear, timely pathways to care. This important work is supported in schools by School Mental Health ASSIST, which is an essential government funded infrastructure that needs to continue to evolve and expand.

If school-based mental health is supported, it is more likely that students will be able to fully engage in learning, leading to improved achievement. Definitions providing clarity to distinguish between life skills, learning skills on report cards and global competencies/transferrable skills are needed. Once clarified, the question of which competencies and skills we want our students to possess when they graduate from high school can be better answered. In addition to the definitions, the skills need to be mapped out in developmental stages from Kindergarten to Grade 12, reinforced and integrated within both a subject-specific and cross-curricular approach. Competencies/transferable skills should not be reported on in isolation of any curriculum, but rather assessed and reported on within the curricular expectations that best fit the particular competency/skill development. (See [21st Century Skills: 6 C's of Education](#) and [The 6 C's of Education for the 21st Century](#) - critical thinking/problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, citizenship, character education).

Today's learners will take their place in the global economy of the future where they may experience multiple career changes over the course of their working life. Competencies/skills, like resiliency and maintaining positive mental health and well-being, are in addition to the knowledge, attitudes and values that together are integral to a comprehensive Kindergarten to Grade 12 education. The weighting of all of these elements needs to be balanced to ensure overall student success both in school and in life. These elements are not just the responsibility of the school and its staff, but a shared collaborative responsibility between the home and the school.

Financial literacy is an important life skill, but there should be shared ownership to developing this skill over time. If financial literacy is introduced in developmental ways across the grades there should be a reduction in curricular expectations to ease the crowded curriculum and allow for sufficient instructional time. There must be explicit curricular references, associated resources and professional learning opportunities provided for teachers to ensure that all school boards have the same tools and expectations to implement financial literacy in a more consistent way. The resources need to be age-appropriate and include applications that can be used at school and shared with parents for use at home.

It is best when competencies/skills are taught in integrated, incremental, relevant, engaging and age-appropriate ways. Students have to be given the opportunity to apply these competencies/skills to real-life problems and circumstances.

What steps could schools take to ban cellphone use in the classroom?

School boards should be permitted to make their own local decisions that allow individual teachers to make age-appropriate classroom decisions about the use of technology, including the use of cellphones.

Students need to be discerning digital citizens and opportunities should be provided within the curriculum to allow students to safely explore various uses and risks of technology in an intentionally guided and supportive environment. Schools and teachers have well-established limits and boundaries with regard to cellphone use in schools and the classroom, similar to other classroom expectations, which are designed to create positive learning environments.

Many school boards have taken the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) approach, which means students bring their own devices to school for educational purposes. For example, at the Peel District School Board where “in the classroom, students will use devices responsibly, and only with the permission and direction of the teacher or other staff member.” (See [PDSB's policy](#))

Cellphones are often used as an instructional resource when other technology is not equitably available for all students in a classroom. Some parents also consider student access to cellphones an added safety measure in emergency situations (e.g. school lockdowns). Any move to a complete ban of cellphones would no doubt lead to daily negative interactions with students. The focus in schools on building strong engaging relationships with students would be compromised. It would become more of a distraction than an important instructional tool. OPSBA supports local board decision making and the allowance of individual teachers to make age-appropriate classroom decisions about the use of technology, including the use of cellphones.

How can we build a new age-appropriate Health and Physical Education curriculum that includes subjects like mental health, sexual health education and the legalization of cannabis?

All students must be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and they must feel valued, included and respected. Curriculum needs to reflect current worldviews and be relevant and applicable. All of the components of a modernized Health and Physical Education (H&PE) curriculum are explicitly contained in the 2015 revised H&PE curriculum, which is why OPSBA continues to support the teaching of the revised curriculum at both the elementary and secondary level.

One suggestion is to maintain the components of the 2015 curriculum, but amend some of the “prompts,” which have been the main source of controversy. In this way, it is necessary for the key components that respect human rights and equity, promote mental health and well-being, student safety, consent and evidence-based approaches to be reinstated explicitly.

Any modernized approach must incorporate the required school board Human Rights and Equity policies and be updated/revised as new issues arise (e.g. legalization of cannabis). The mandated role of publicly elected school board trustees is to support student achievement and well-being for each and every student in their care. OPSBA’s key priorities have always focused on the social, emotional, intellectual, physical and mental well-being of children and youth. OPSBA and its members strongly supported the release of the revised curriculum in 2015, which reflects our priorities and the foundational principles of equity, social justice, inclusion and diversity.

What elements should be included in a Ministry of Education Parents’ Bill of Rights?

A formalized Parents’ Bill of Rights is not necessary. Our collective focus is on children and youth and their achievement and well-being. Every partner in education has a role to play in student success and as such our collective rights and responsibilities are intertwined. Education is a shared responsibility among parents, guardians, students, teachers, trustees, board staff, community agencies, interest groups, and the provincial government (its policies and funding) and its agencies. School board trustees are democratically elected officials who support local education and play a key role in supporting parents and students. The involvement of parents and community members in the education system enriches the learning environment and directly contributes to student achievement and well-being.

The Ministry of Education and school boards should continue to promote the many opportunities for parents and guardians to be actively engaged in their child’s education (e.g. volunteering, attending meetings or being a member of a

school council or the Parent Involvement Committee, attending standing committee and school board public meetings, participating in parent nights, conferences, local and board-wide consultations).

A specific example of successful parent engagement are the Parents Reaching Out Grants that were “designed to support parents in identifying barriers to parent engagement in their own community and to find local solutions to involve more parents in support of student achievement, human rights, equity and well-being.” These need to be reinstated.

Active community involvement also helps to create strong, democratically vibrant communities. School boards promote a healthy partnership with parents and the community by:

- Ensuring schools and the school system are accessible and welcoming to parents and other members of the community
- Allowing the public open access to relevant information about educational policies, programs, and services
- Creating equity of access and equity of opportunity for programs and pathways to support their child’s education
- Encouraging meaningful opportunities for input and consultation, e.g. school councils and parent involvement committees.

School boards are committed to parent engagement strategies to create a welcoming environment for parents and make it easier for all parents to participate in their children’s education. When schools succeed in engaging parents there is a strong and positive connection to improved student achievement. The evidence of the benefits of families being involved in their children’s education is overwhelming. Research shows that parental engagement in their children’s learning positively affects the child’s academic performance in both primary and secondary schools and leads to:

- Improved academic achievement
 - Greater cognitive competence
 - Greater problem-solving skills
 - More school enjoyment
 - Consistent school attendance
 - Fewer behavioural problems at school.
- [\(Good Governance Guide, 2014\)](#)

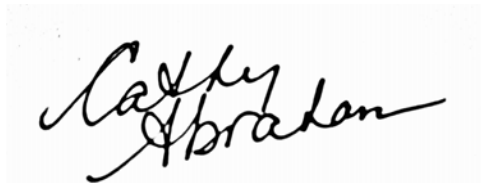
Do you have any other feedback or ideas?

1. Recognition and support for the continued implementation of the Calls to Action of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
2. The principles of equity, social justice, and culturally relevant and responsive teaching need to be fundamental to all curricular revisions in order to provide a supportive, nurturing learning environment that is respectful and inclusive of Ontario's student diversity. In this context as well, we would like to see continued recognition and support for the Equity Secretariat.
3. School boards need predictable funding levels, including a degree of local flexibility to provide support to meet student needs within their local context. Specifically school boards need to continue to be able to provide:
 - Safe, well-equipped facilities in good repair
 - New schools in growth areas
 - Reliable transportation
 - Readily available and current resources for relevant instruction and learning
 - Ongoing professional learning opportunities for educators to continually build capacity
 - Specialized supports for students with a range of special needs and mental health issues as required.

OPSBA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback and we hope there will be an opportunity for education stakeholders to review the consultation results before any final decisions or recommendations are made.

We look forward to continuing this important conversation to further elaborate on any of the suggestions and approaches identified in this submission.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Abraham". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cathy Abraham
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