



**ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION**

Leading Education's Advocates

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January 11, 2024

To: Ernie Hardeman, Chair of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs
Vanessa Kattar, Clerk

Re: 2024 Pre-Budget Consultations

Dear Chair and Members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs:

In early November 2023, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) provided the Ministry of Education with a detailed submission to its 2024-25 Education Funding Consultation Guide, which included our recommendations for inclusion in next year's Grants for Student Needs (GSN). The Committee also graciously provided OPSBA leaders with opportunities to appear at the public hearings in Oshawa and Mississauga.

As part of our advocacy for effective investments in public education, we would like to also share our funding needs as expressed to the Ministry of Education. Again, we wish to remind committee members that students, families and our schools continue to recover from the pandemic (even as COVID-19 persists in our communities) and so many children and youth continue to require stronger public services.

There are many issues colliding at present – mental health concerns, the rising costs of affordable housing and food, serious global conflicts, and increasing polarization in society. These all lead to challenges that are also felt in our schools and classrooms. We all want our schools to be safe and welcoming environments in which our students can learn and thrive, and our employees can engage in meaningful work.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to continued support for public education in the provincial budget.

Sincerely,

Cathy Abraham
President, Ontario Public School Boards' Association

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public 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 is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.



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OPPSBA Submission to the 2024 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations



OPSBA Submission to the 2024 Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations

Areas of Focus

- Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
- Indigenous Education
- Local School Board Governance
- Mental Health Supports
- Student Transportation
- Skilled Trades and Apprenticeships

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The impact and consequences of historical and ongoing marginalization, racism, antisemitism, and other forms of hate, have created systemic barriers that prevent some students from fully participating in Ontario's education system. Ontario's public education system plays a critical role in providing educational leadership and has demonstrated commitment to dismantling structural and institutional systems of oppression by identifying, validating, and tackling barriers in learning and work environments. In addition, the recent strengthening of Holocaust education is an important example of how our education system can ensure that our students develop an understanding of how to identify, respond to, and charge harmful assumptions and stereotypes, antisemitism, and other forms of racism or hate.



To continue building on the ongoing commitment to understanding and addressing the historical and current impacts of systemic racism and discrimination that results in inequities experienced by some students, staff and other members of the educational community, funding must be prioritized for key areas.

OPSBA recommends that:

- The Ministry of Education support school board staff in building expertise in equity auditing, demographic data collection, research, analysis and policy monitoring and evaluation to ensure anti-racism, and equity policy goals that address racism and oppression are implemented successfully. The accountability frameworks related to monitoring and tracking require dedicated funding to ensure continuous improvements for all Ontario students. Deep professional learning is required to combat racism, hate and discrimination in all its forms as we see the rise of hate incidents occurring in Ontario.

- The Ministry of Education invest in the Graduation Coach Program for Black Students to expand it provincially and comprehensively promote it in all publicly funded school boards. The direct supports and mentorship the coaches provide is invaluable in supporting student well-being and achievement.
- That the government publish clear final guidelines on the built environment for the K-12 sector; and provide capital funding to equal that required for school boards to meet these provincially mandated requirements; and work with school boards to ensure compliance with Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities (AODA) legislation. Please see [OPSBA's submission to the Fourth Improvement Review of the AODA](#).
- The Ministry of Education commit to responding to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's forthcoming report on tackling anti-black racism in education with targeted funding supports for school boards. Please see [OPSBA's submission to the commission](#).

Indigenous Education

Ontario's English public school boards have the majority of self-identified Indigenous students who attend publicly funded schools. When referring to "Indigenous students," we do so in recognition of the diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit nations and communities (on-reserve, off-reserve, status, and non-status) encompassed under the umbrella term of "Indigenous." To support these students and our members, OPSBA established its Indigenous Trustees' Council, which is the primary advisory body on Indigenous Education. Together, we want to develop and strengthen relationships to facilitate access to programs, resources, and supports for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students that reflect the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's [Calls to Action](#). Indigenous education is beneficial to all students, especially as we look to prepare today's students for participation in Ontario's future workplaces and community settings.



Ontario needs to strengthen its role in supporting the revitalization and resurgence of Indigenous languages in this province: an action that is of critical priority. The numbers of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Speakers with language knowledge continues to diminish and the numbers of language speakers with teaching certification are even more reduced. Publicly funded schools are regularly experiencing this pressure as it reverberates into challenges that manifest as longstanding language teacher vacancies. We need a properly resourced, actionable strategy that is co-led and informed by Indigenous partners, to train, certify, and retain Indigenous language teachers in schools, and as an overall goal, advances the resurgence of the original languages of this province. Language is synonymous with culture, and both of these things are necessary for Indigenous student success and well-being.

Last year, a Realignment of the Indigenous Education Grant was implemented, much to the concern of our members. Some boards have reported that Indigenous Education initiatives are at risk due to a resulting deficit in funding. Some boards have indicated that the one-time mitigation funding will not be sufficient to stabilize programming, and that additional funding support will be necessary to bridge implementation of the realignment. A significant concern of members centres on accountability. Our members want assurance that funding, which is intended to support Indigenous students and Indigenous Education programming, is

appropriately tracked and regularly reported on with measurable outcomes. Trustees, and Indigenous Trustees specifically, should be engaged through appropriate local processes with an allocation of funding that is specifically intended for Indigenous education purposes. Reporting on how and where funding has been utilized, must be communicated to trustees in clear and accessible formats.

A growing trend has been the addition of Indigenous Trustee and Indigenous Student Trustee roles among our board tables. Having Indigenous voices present at decision-making tables makes a difference and it is important to continue support for advocacy and growth in this area. We thank the Minister of Education for recently supporting our young leaders at our Association's northern conference through funding that covered travel and accommodations. The meeting was very productive and the attending trustees greatly appreciated the opportunity.

Since the launch of the [First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework](#) in 2007, the ministry has consistently highlighted Indigenous education as a key priority. Improved student achievement and a closing of the gaps in numeracy and literacy, graduation rates, retention, and advancement to postsecondary pursuits were specifically noted. Resources need to be allocated to ensure that progress continues in these areas, as the gaps in achievement levels between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students continue to persist. The ministry should consider supporting Supervised Alternative Learning sites in partner First Nations to advance progress in these areas.



We support a curriculum for all students from Kindergarten to Grade 12 that contains clear expectations that every student will acquire knowledge and understanding of Treaties and of the historical context that gave rise to residential schools, the intergenerational impact on Indigenous children and their families, and the ongoing legacy of reconciliation that is the responsibility of all Canadians. At the same time, it is also important to celebrate Indigenous communities in contemporary contexts, to demonstrate and teach that in spite of the historical trauma, Indigenous communities are still flourishing today.

There are many examples of Ontario curricula that need updating to more respectfully and appropriately reflect Indigenous content and perspectives. Ontario should commit resources to engage in prioritization of curricula for Indigenous content revision. In carrying out these efforts, it is important to respectfully engage Indigenous partners, such as the Indigenous Trustees' Council, in meaningful engagement and consultation throughout curriculum review processes.

OPSBA recommends that:

- The Ministry develops an Indigenous Languages Strategy in partnership with Indigenous education stakeholders that is adequately resourced to address actioning Indigenous Languages Revitalization as a key priority through efforts such as:
 - The training, certification and retention of Indigenous language teachers

- Flexibility for boards to develop innovative alternatives for language funding uses, when unable to fill language teacher vacancies
- Native Languages curriculum review and revision
- Support for advancing innovative approaches, such as the Elders Endorsement Model for Language Circles
- Development of partnerships that advance Indigenous languages revitalization goals
- Continued investment through the Priorities and Partnerships Fund for Indigenous Language Revitalization initiatives.
- The Ministry of Education support Land-Based Learning with resources to support Indigenous spaces in schools, including outdoor spaces for Land-Based Learning.
- The Ministry of Education provide sustainable funding to hire Indigenous Graduation Coaches in all school boards.
- The Ministry of Education provide funding for local school board initiatives that support the transitions experienced by Indigenous students, including, but not limited to:
 - First Nation school to public school (this can occur at various grades, depending on the grade-levels offered by the school that the student is transitioning from)
 - Grade 8 to High School
 - Students moving from school to school (high transiency)
 - Secondary to Post-Secondary
 - Students in Foster Care
 - Re-engagement for students that have left school.
- Strategies be implemented that focus on Indigenous youth participation in the Ministry of Education’s entrepreneurship programs (SHSM, co-ops, apprenticeships, etc.).
- Continued support is provided for Indigenous Education curriculum and resources;
- The Ministry of Education collaborate with other ministries to support parent and community engagement (Ministry of Community and Social Service, Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, etc.).
- The Ministry of Education provide funding for Indigenous Student Trustees to gather together, at the very least on an annual basis, to network and build leadership skills, with mentorship from adult Indigenous trustees.

Local School Board Governance

OPSBA is committed to supporting the role and leadership of local and democratically elected school boards in Ontario’s English public education system. Trustees are the decision-makers that know their communities best. They are the crucial link between the local school board and their communities. This includes the trustees at our member boards, school authorities, treatment centres, student trustees, and Indigenous trustees.



The Association strives to equip every trustee with the tools they need to be excellent board members and leaders. OPSBA has developed a comprehensive suite of learning opportunities designed to support this commitment.

Bill 98, [Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act](#), referred to enabling standardized training requirements for trustees, Directors of Education and other senior board officials. We are supportive of having consistency of messaging for all system leaders but want to ensure we are part of that planning and in the development of new and additional resources.

OPSBA recommends that:

- The Ministry of Education work with school board/trustee associations to co-develop and deliver professional development opportunities that are timely, relevant, and contextualized to the unique role of trustees.
- The Ministry of Education work with school board/trustee associations on a communications strategy that reinforces the important role of local school boards, the importance of trustees' governance role, and the complexities of the role, and responsibilities required of trustees (budget developments, local policy development etc.) to support the diverse needs of students and their families.
- The Ministry of Education support school boards and trustees at the provincial government level with the Premier's office and other ministries, particularly the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Children and Community Services and Health.
- The Ministry of Education support a review of the current [professional learning offerings](#) by the [Ontario Education Services Corporation](#) (OESC) – to modernize, update, and increase equitable access of the materials.
- The Ministry of Education provide regular and consistent Professional Development opportunities for school board chairs, vice-chairs, Directors of Education and other senior board leaders.

Mental Health Supports

OPSBA continues to support the implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated mental health and addictions strategy. With long-standing data indicating that approximately one in five children and youth in Ontario have a mental health challenge, early investments in school-based mental health and addictions services will yield long-term benefits for the health care system and the wellness of students and future generations.



Currently, due to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the prevalence of mental health issues among students and staff has risen significantly.

These realities necessitate the development of a staged three-to-five-year strategic Grants for Student Needs based funding plan to support school boards, schools, educators, students, parents/guardians, and families as they transition from the COVID-19 school experience. From a healthy classroom perspective there has never been more evidence to support the compelling need to balance and integrate curricular and mental health and well-being expectations into every classroom. School transformation over the next five-to-10 years must incorporate this as a critical underpinning. Although the primary responsibility resides with the



Ministry of Education, inter-ministerial collaboration is essential to remedy a fractured and significantly underfunded continuum of care.

Mental health and equitable student outcomes are inextricably linked. A strong pre-condition for all school-based mental health services are school boards and schools that operate through an anti-racism and anti-oppressive stance. It is important to ensure that interventions are culturally responsive or can be transformed to meet the needs of the students served. For this work to be effectively incorporated into daily practice, there must be training and resources for all staff, which will require funding and resource development.

All of the recommendations below reflect long-standing mental health and well-being needs at the school, system, and community level, which were exacerbated during the pandemic, raising concerns over a longer-term impact. There needs to be a collective understanding that mental health and well-being requires a sustained predictable commitment of government funding to effectively address the increased need for supports and services for students, staff, and families for the foreseeable future.

The recent position paper by the Ontario Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health, [Let's Put our Heads Together](#), provides the evidence-based research that supports all of the following education-focused recommendations.

OPSBA recommends that:

- The ministry continue to annually increase the funding for School Mental Health Ontario's (SMHO) infrastructure to reflect current system needs and long-term sustainability.
- The ministry/government commit to ongoing investment in policies and programs that increase access to culturally appropriate, identity-affirming, anti-oppressive, and inclusive mental health supports and services for children and youth across Ontario.

- The Grade 7/8 mental health modules be expanded to include a K-12 Comprehensive mental health strategy.
- The ministry/government commit to sustained funding of the Ontario Child Health Survey, and in collaboration with research partners, increase the frequency of the survey's administration (for example, on a five-year cycle).
- The equivalent funding of a full-time position be implemented in all 72 school boards for each of the next three years for a designated School Board Staff Mental Health Lead to coordinate with the student mental health lead in support of healthy classrooms.
- Professional learning, training and provincial coordination be integral to support this position (*see rationale in Appendix A).
- The ministry/government work with all system partners to pilot implementation of the system of care described in [Right time, right care: Strengthening Ontario's mental health and addictions system of care for children and young people](#) (School and Community System of Care Collaborative, 2022).
- There be a continued focus on expanding school-based resources, supports and services (e.g., mental health promotion, early identification, prevention and intervention) for children, youth and their families.
- Funding be prioritized to support sustained, ongoing, incremental, iterative professional development opportunities (e.g., job-embedded approaches, a coaching model) to eliminate the negative schooling outcomes associated with all forms of historic systemic discrimination. This is a precondition for culturally responsive, identity-affirming mental health support.
- There be a continued increase in the number of school-based mental health professionals (social workers, psychologists, guidance counsellors, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers) to address the significant increase in the number and severity of students requiring support.
- There be a continued increase in community agency supports and services to eliminate wait lists for sufficient and timely pathways to care across the province, especially in northern, remote, and rural areas.
- There be investment in a coordinated system of care that includes community mental health, public health, hospitals, and cultural/faith partners that has students and families at the centre, ensuring that community mental health centres focus primarily on intensive services and are staffed sufficiently for this role.
- A focus on mental health supports for transitional youth is ensured, especially youth transitioning to post-secondary settings, with an even greater focus in this area due to the pandemic.
- Additional resources for attendance counsellor support and credit recovery/rescue support be provided, especially to reengage students and families as a result of remote learning and COVID-19 as indicated through the increase in home schooling.
- The provincial government strongly advocate to the federal government for mental health supports and services in First Nations band-operated schools, proportional to supports available in provincially funded schools.
- Careers in the mental health sector be marketed to students.
- Pre-service teacher programs include mental health and well-being learning that is aligned with School Mental Health Ontario resources/supports being delivered in Ontario school boards.

Student Transportation

The Student Transportation Grant is meant to provide school boards with funding to transport students to and from home and school, including students with special needs. However, it can also include transport for school field trips, sporting events, other extracurricular activities, experiential learning such as cooperative education, and perhaps additional service for before-and-after school care. This requires a coordinated effort often involving partners including other school boards, different school bus operators, separate consortia, and in many instances, school boards working with their municipalities' local public transit.

Last year, the Ministry of Education made changes to the grant formula for student transportation that, if left unchanged, will lead to significant negative impacts, including growing transportation deficits and a widening gap between family expectations and school boards' ability to provide transportation service to families. One issue that has resonated with many boards is the elimination of funding for smaller special purpose vehicles (such as minivans) that transport students with special and/or high needs to and from specialized programs (including arts programs). It was noted that these highly used vehicles are often the best option to transport students who have accessibility or accommodation needs. Another issue that has been shared with us is that drivers not being fully or adequately compensated for their time.



There are other outstanding issues and concerns that remain and these include:

- Driver shortages and route cancellations
- Driver attraction and retention (due to compensation, few hours, split shifts)
- Bus safety
- Increased fuel and maintenance costs that are in excess of ministry-funded levels

The updated funding formula does not reflect the actual cost of transporting students. School boards acknowledge that they are responsible for negotiating contracts with bus operators (through their consortia) in good faith, but the reality is these external partners are sensitive to inflationary pressures, and with very limited school bus manufacturing capacity in Canada, subject to foreign currency pressures as well. The result is contracts that cannot be procured within the ministry-funded rates. This has led to boards facing immense funding pressures and budget deficits in this area. It should be noted that our northern boards (rural and remote) face additional challenges including the length of routes, extreme temperatures, and the costs of ground and air transportation for Indigenous students from remote northern communities who attend public schools in urban communities.

OPSBA recommends that:

- The Ministry of Education consult with school board/trustee associations and COSBO to address these urgent needs and provide boards with the additional funding to eliminate deficits in this area.
- The Ministry of Education implement an updated framework that uses a needs-based approach and benchmarks that reflect the true costs of providing student transportation, including the recognition of inflationary increases.
- The Ministry of Education commit to the investment of increased funding to attract and retain school bus drivers.
- The Ministry of Education staff work with its municipal counterparts on joint initiatives to support students (i.e. [TTC](#) offers free rides for children under the age of 12, City of Kingston [High School Student Transit Pass.](#))

Skilled Trades and Apprenticeships

OPSBA applauds the government's recent efforts to promote the skilled trades and apprenticeships for students in school settings, however OPSBA does not support adding a new accelerated apprenticeship pathway for Grade 11 and 12 students.

OPSBA would like to see even more focus at the provincial and local elementary and secondary school level to help students and their families develop positive attitudes toward the trades and for students to be provided with more "hands on" and experiential learning opportunities. An apprenticeship focus can easily be expanded and integrated into existing secondary school programs and through secondary school experiential and cooperative education programs, specifically the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP) and Specialist High Skills Majors (SHSM). This will involve balancing and/or shifting funding levels for commencing an apprenticeship to secondary schools rather than only in post-secondary and employment settings.

OPSBA recommends that:

- Funding and placements for the OYAP, SHSM and Cooperative Education programs be expanded, and that the government expand relevant opportunities for students to begin to earn apprenticeship hours while in secondary school.
- The lack of skilled trades' education and apprenticeship options for Indigenous students in Indigenous communities be addressed.
- Appropriate funding to ensure equity of access to work placements including transportation costs especially in rural, remote and northern communities be incorporated.



- Dedicated funding for renovations in secondary school facilities and new construction to provide shop programs to support careers in the skilled trades (Grades 7 to 12) be provided.
- Amendments that will change the journey person to apprentice ratio for all trades to increase student access to these career opportunities be supported.
- Targeted marketing and communications, specifically directed at parents, students, educators and employers, to further elevate skilled trades to a respected and desirable pathway be continued.
- The Pre-apprenticeship Training Program for secondary school graduates and 18-year-olds who are looking to reengage in their education through skilled trades be expanded and promoted.

On the following pages, you will find *Appendix A: School Board Staff Mental Health Lead Rationale*, as well as our responses to the Ministry of Education's Funding Consultation Guide.

As a valued and trusted advocate for public education in Ontario, we again thank you for this opportunity to share our feedback and recommendations. Ontario's English public school boards and their trustees are dedicated and committed to improving student achievement and well-being for all students.

Appendix A *

School Board Staff Mental Health Lead Rationale

In 2011-12, OPSBA proposed the staged implementation of school board mental health leads to support students in all 72 school boards. In conjunction with the leadership of School Mental Health Ontario, this successful strategy has been integral to creating coordinated school board and provincial mental health action plans, development of evidence-based resources, building staff capacity over time and facilitating key community connections.

Mentally healthy students are directly linked to mentally healthy school and board staff. Given the stressors linked to supporting students during the pandemic, there is an identified need to replicate this successful model by creating a similar position that designates a School Board Staff Mental Health Lead to support staff. Although an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a helpful staff resource, this position by comparison is designed as a proactive strategy to build capacity for healthy classrooms. Ideally, this Lead position would be a registered health professional with defined areas of competence related to adult mental health and workplace mental health.

Over the last number of years there have been many requests of the student mental health leads to support staff mental health, which is inconsistent with the original intent of the role and diverts key resources/supports away from escalating student-based mental health needs. Given the current realities related to staff mental health, it is recommended that the equivalent funding of a full-time position be implemented in all 72 school boards for each of the next three years. This staff mental health lead position would directly champion the priority of staff mental health, and work in tandem with the student mental health lead to coordinate, align and implement strategies and practices to build, maintain and sustain healthy classroom environments for students and staff. This dual-pronged approach will lead to improved, sustainable outcomes for both students and staff.

Implementing this strategy will demonstrate the incredible value that we collectively place on school and board staff. It will intentionally promote the inclusive and productive learning and teaching environments needed for all members of the school community to thrive. OPSBA would be pleased to be part of an education partner working group to further develop this strategy.



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