



## **Joint Submission to the Premier's Special Advisor on Community Hubs**

December 18, 2015

TO: Karen Pitre, Special Advisor to the Premier on Community Hubs

c.c. The Honourable Liz Sandals, Minister of Education  
Nancy Mudrinic, Assistant Deputy Minister, Cabinet Office

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Ontario's four school board/trustee associations – the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, the Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'Ontario and the Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques – appreciate the current provincial focus on the most effective utilization of public resources and space for the creation of viable and sustainable community hubs to support the well-being of Ontarians. As school boards across the province manage a significant segment of public assets in communities, we bring to the community hubs review both depth of experience and perspective.

Supporters of Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools elect trustees to represent their distinctive interests, community mandates and local priorities in education. Trustees bring a unique and frontline viewpoint to this initiative that helps ensure the work of school boards reflects the actual needs and priorities of Ontario residents, families and the entire community.

Our associations are committed to supporting this initiative provided that school boards' concerns and challenges are taken into account.

As school boards are recognized for their potential as partners in community hubs, it is important to also recognize their very specific mandate. This mandate significantly and rightfully ensures that education dollars are used for education purposes. We encourage inter-ministerial cooperation to address adequate resources needed to realize the vision for sustainable and viable community hubs that meet the distinctive needs of Ontario's communities.

At the centre of most communities are kindergarten to Grade 12 schools, which will be considered one of many varieties of sites to house services for residents spanning the full spectrum of life, from early years to senior citizens' centres. As guiding principles for a provincial vision of community hubs, that includes English public, English Catholic, French public and French Catholic, we recommend:

- Ensuring that the education sector’s needs are first on the list to access available space in each other’s facilities, and in any publicly funded infrastructure,
- Ensuring that community hubs include partners who are complementary to one another and respectful of each other’s distinctive values and priorities,
- Having facilities and services that are accessible and equitable for all members of local and unique communities, both rural and urban,
- Offering language support based on a community’s unique needs,
- Establishing hubs that meet an identified community’s need or service expectation,
- Protecting the health and safety of students,
- Creation of school settings that are appropriate, do not compromise student achievement strategies and are fully funded by the government.

Through consultation with our four associations’ members, we offer our joint comments and recommendations based on the following three major themes:

- Student Safety, Education and Programming
- Opportunities and Barriers for Partnerships
- Education Funding, Infrastructure and Budget Cycles

## **Student Safety, Education and Programming**

### **Safety**

Where a community hub incorporates facilities and services to educate and care for children and youth, safety must be of paramount concern. Partners selected for such hubs should be selected based on criteria determined by school boards to ensure there are no security or safety hazards associated with the presence of any proposed community hub partners. The physical structure of a community hub may also present safety concerns that must be assessed. School boards have the knowledge and experience that can effectively recognize such hazards and risks. This insight should be relied upon when creating community hubs that incorporate learning or daycare services for children and youth.

### **Education Programming**

Community hubs can enhance programming options for school boards by providing new educational space in desirable locations where boards do not already have existing facilities. In addition to adding potentially convenient locations for school boards, community hub partners may offer services a school board can or does utilize.

As community hubs are envisioned and created, opportunities to enhance educational programming should be considered whenever possible throughout the partner identification process.

Interests in establishing a community hub should not supersede a school board’s decision to close an underutilized school that prohibits the delivery of quality education, efficiently.

## **Opportunities and Barriers to Partnerships**

Community hubs can serve to maintain school assets in the public realm by seeking out viable partnership opportunities with public or private sector organizations to make better use of under-utilized space within schools. Boards seek community hub partners that are able to meet the operating costs associated with occupying space in schools.

Viable partners in a community hub should share a common vision and values and work to foster trusting relationships between facility partners and the school. This level of cooperation and mutual respect is the foundation for establishing a successful community hub.

While municipalities do have great interest in the hub model, and at times some parallel roles and concerns in the partnership process, school board staff must maintain autonomy in planning and managing school spaces that meet the varied needs of students and school staff.

Staffs of community hub partner services need to be considered part of the school staffing body – they should attend staff functions and could be there for parent walk-throughs and open houses. These types of relationships need to be nurtured and considered to ensure hubs work well.

Other considerations include collective agreements for unionized staff. Terms of existing collective agreements must be examined with respect to the delivery of services and staffing complements in school based community hubs.

Successful partnerships can bring about opportunities for expanded service delivery that includes, among the more popular community services: child daycare centres, community drop-in centres for youth and young parents, athletic clubs, and seniors' centres.

For partnerships to be successful, well-defined agreements are required. Agreements should clearly outline the responsibilities of all parties involved. There should also be a high degree of collaboration and support among on-site leaders, and a well-developed dispute resolution process (e.g., on-site management committees).

### **Community Interests**

Ontario has a successful history of creating shared services that reflect and serve the interests and needs of the community.

There are examples across the province of community hubs working with local communities, including faith and non-profit groups, to address important daily living priorities from home care to basic nutrition. Some hubs host community gardens and offer access to nutritious fresh food, community dinners, and food nutrition education sessions.

Determining the need and types of services for a community hub should be based on data and purpose in order to appropriately decide where a hub should be located, i.e. municipal building, school, not-for-profit, etc. Creating opportunities for communities to articulate their needs in a timely way will help to ensure that community hubs remain relevant and viable.

Under current conditions, some small remote communities cannot support hubs in schools for several reasons. There is often no public transportation and schools do not have enough parking. Smaller communities may have trouble finding available partnerships and the declining population will not be able to support an increase in public services. Retaining school buildings with insufficient students for viable programming would not be of true benefit to the students or community. As well, long-term viability of the agency/service needs to be considered. Services may need to change to respond to demographic shifts. A practical example could be a child care facility being retrofitted to become a youth drop-in centre.

Use of community hubs should be forward-looking and embrace the ways in which young people access services via technology while also taking into account that some youth may not fit into traditional categories. These issues currently present barriers. A cited example is the process of permitting school space for sports/social activities, which could be done in a way to make better use of technology such as e-booking and e-payment systems.

Hubs can allow families to access programs and services in their own communities without the cost and inconvenience of travel. In order to do this, services will need to be expanded, made fully accessible and coordinated with current provincial initiatives.

### **Child Care Services**

Daycare and before and after school care are significant needs in many communities and can be addressed through a strategic approach to nurturing partnerships. For example, appropriate provincial incentives can encourage partnerships with other “community-oriented” service providers, like child care organizations. Families appreciate when schools are able to offer a “one-stop-shop” for key community and social services. Consideration of these kinds of family services (daycare, before-and-after-school programming, sports activities, youth clubs, health care, etc.) when planning a community hub will contribute to its viability and sustainability. Another upcoming consideration for school boards will be the six-to-12-year-old before-and-after-school school programming consultation and implementation.

### **Coordination between Partners**

Coordination between agencies and government ministries to create community hubs involves significant complexities that if not carefully considered and managed can create barriers to implementation and long-term viability. Examples of complexities include cost sharing among multiple tenants, labour agreements, determining necessary security measures, and long-term capital costs not fully covered by lease payments to assist with the maintenance of buildings.

Options for addressing these challenges include the establishment of a provincial office to assist with the creation of community hubs. This provincial office could be accessed by all stakeholders and serve as a resource for the interactions between partners and various ministries. There is a definite need for a centralized information source where, for instance, a school principal could be directed to determine answers and advice regarding approvals, zoning issues, etc.

Other options for managing complexities within a community hub include providing resources to build the specific capabilities and strengths needed for an onsite Community Hubs Manager. Successful hubs have to date acknowledged the need to find ways to enhance the abilities of onsite managers to better manage daily scenarios.

It is recommended that resources be dedicated to creating a “Community Hubs Partnership In-service Program” for use by prospective and existing partners to address the need for understanding expectations, partner mandates, student safety priorities, contracts, and operation and financial requirements that are all part of partnering in a community hub with school boards.

This program could include a communications portal or mechanism (such as regular meetings) for sectors to easily share and obtain information. Community hub manuals could also be developed to contain content such as guiding principles and common information for all stakeholders.

## **Education Funding, Infrastructure and Budget Cycles**

It is often too late after potential partners’ capital funding has begun to flow from the province to reverse the forward momentum of the drive for each party to have their own spaces. Local school boards cannot control this outcome. We are aware of a current cross-ministerial effort to break down silos with regards to community hub implementation. We fully support this initiative and would recommend that this effort ensures potentially divergent funding timelines/paths from various Ministries are avoided at the local level.

We are hopeful that the new *Child Care and Early Years Act* and its regulations will allow greater alignment and flexibility for building and space requirements. However, a remaining barrier to the creation of community hubs is often that capital funding can be used for new schools and maintenance, but not to repurpose facilities; e.g. to renovate an elementary school for adult education or alternative secondary education. In addition, smaller boards, in particular, do not have large planning departments or the resources to coordinate the community development and ongoing maintenance of substantive hubs. We strongly urge the government to provide school boards and local partners with funding for renovations and site management when a community hub is located within a school board site. Boards should receive funding to hire a community hubs manager to coordinate implementation and management of established hubs. There must be someone working with board offices to do this work.

When utilizing schools as community hubs, building management during the months of July and August must be considered. Providing school board custodial services in the summer can be a problem as custodians in some regions are required to take most of their vacation in the summer. In addition, many daycare centres/organizations are not provided with enough funding to pay for these additional custodial services in the summer. Custodial and maintenance fees continue to be an issue in a number of our member boards where space has been dedicated to community agencies. We recommend that any community hubs partners must receive adequate funding to cover maintenance and custodial services costs incurred by the boards throughout the year.

The creation of community hubs would be well-served by flexible changes to the formula that provide for potential growth in a community’s service needs, if identified by a local integrated planning process.

We encourage municipality and region-wide studies of excess building and existing green space. The province could consider new protocols that call for municipalities, school boards and the province to work together to create long-range plans for community hub development. In densely populated areas where space is at a premium, city planners, developers and school boards must work together to design a strategic long-term plan for community use of schools, community hubs and best utilization of school board properties, new development and long-term needs of these communities (based on agreed upon common data/information that shows gaps in existing service provision).

The need for local capital resources should be assessed from an inter-ministerial level to more effectively identify varied uses for empty school buildings that serve the unique needs of each community. For example, based on the changing demographics of a region or municipality, the best use of an empty elementary school might be to convert it into a nursing or convalescent home if the costs are not prohibitive, with shared services for the needs of youth.

Finally, we are pleased that the Ministry of Education is proposing changes to O. Reg. 444/98 – Disposition of Surplus Real Property. We have responded to the recommended changes as individual associations and look forward to participating in any future discussions.

We must reiterate that we believe that the concept of community hubs holds great promise for Ontario. However, we also stress that the development of a hub concept needs to be community-based and always reflect local needs and include all relevant community partners. Determining the need for a community hub should be based on data and purpose in order to appropriately decide where a hub should be located, i.e. municipal building, school, not-for-profit third party facility, etc.

Publicly funded Catholic, English and French schools are at the centre of most communities and will be considered one of many varieties of sites to house services for residents spanning the full spectrum of life.

We thank you for your consideration in reviewing our thoughts, concerns and recommendations and look forward to participating in further consultation as the implementation of the Community Hubs Strategic Framework and Action Plan continues into 2016.

Sincerely,



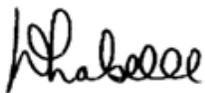
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