

# ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION (OPSBA)

## RESPONSE TO

### DRAFT MINISTRY MEMORANDUM – ENCOURAGING FACILITY PARTNERSHIPS

October 5, 2009



ONTARIO PUBLIC  
SCHOOL BOARDS'  
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

OPSBA member school boards support the concept of facility partnerships, especially with partners that serve to improve educational opportunities for our students. School boards have established partnerships involving facilities and playing fields with other school boards, local municipalities and community agencies & associations. Establishing facility partnerships is not a new concept and through the years school boards have always attempted to forge more facility partnerships that benefit their students.

#### **Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline & Facility Partnership Policy**

On June 26, 2009 the Ministry released Ministry Memorandum 2009:B7 detailing revisions to the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline. The revised guideline included the addition of a reference to board long-term enrolment and capital planning, *including the potential for partnerships*. The Ministry followed the release of the revised guideline with the release of the draft facility partnerships policy, both documents directly link partnerships and accommodation reviews. OPSBA is concerned that the release of this draft memorandum and the previous inclusion of a reference to partnerships in the revised accommodation review guideline may raise false expectations regarding school boards' ability to avoid school closures when dealing with declining enrolment. While accommodation reviews and school closures are understandably a difficult process for school boards and communities, many school boards have been moving forward to sustain the integrity of instructional program and rationalize school accommodation in the face of declining enrolment. When schools are closed by school boards it is with a focus on the instructional program and educational opportunities for students not due to a lack of local community partners to occupy empty space. It is important that facility partnerships be placed in proper context, facility partnerships that serve to enhance educational opportunities for our students serve a valuable purpose but these partnerships cannot overcome the reality facing school boards and communities in dealing with declining enrolment.

***The primary focus for school boards with respect to accommodation review and facility partnerships is educational opportunities and student achievement.***

## **Administrative Workload**

School boards are concerned about the increase in workload caused by the requirements of this policy especially in connection with the previous announcement of a reduction in funding for school board administration in 2010-11. Implementation of this policy will require significant administrative work in terms of additional annual reports, communication with community agencies and other potential partners, evaluation of partnership proposals and negotiation of partnership agreements. Experience by school boards with *Best Start* agreements and other facility partnership initiatives has shown that there is significant administrative work involved on the part of school board staff in putting these agreements in place. At the same time, Ministry Memorandum 2009:B2 indicates that the Ministry plans to reduce funding for board administration in 2010-11. OPSBA would urge the Ministry to rethink the planned reduction in funding for board administration given that this policy and other Ministry initiatives are impacting on the workload of board administration.

***The Ministry should sustain current funding levels for board administration and evaluate the need to increase funding in this area given the administrative workload created by this policy and other Ministry initiatives.***

## **Co-building Partnerships**

Currently, school boards prepare detailed capital plans which are updated on an ongoing basis. These capital plans include current and projected enrolments, building capacities and other data relevant to identifying co-building opportunities. In many instances school boards are working within critical timelines to deliver new school accommodation and school renovations to communities, any delays caused by prolonged negotiations with municipalities would impact on the delivery of school accommodation in a timely fashion causing boards to initiate costly contingency plans. In addition to the costs, it is important to recognize that delays in providing accommodation result in significant hardship for students and their families and may ultimately impact student success. Once the criteria for partnership have been developed, it would be helpful to have a pre-qualification process. This would help to avoid delays during the building application process that might result from applications for partnership by unsuitable candidates.

***Plans for co-building will need to ensure an alignment of capital building programs between the school board and municipality/agency/association to ensure timely delivery of school accommodation is not impacted.***

***School boards should have an identified source of funding prior to soliciting co-building partners so as not to raise expectations with a potential partner without the ability to necessarily follow through with the project.***

## **Planning - Long-term Lease Opportunities**

When identifying candidates for long-term lease opportunities, it will be important to consider the period of time for which the space will be available. A school board's space requirements are subject to a number of variables and therefore, considerable uncertainty. As a result, extreme caution will be required before making long-term commitments. In addition, some capital investment will likely be required in order to make the space suitable for lease. If the projected period of availability is too short (e.g. 2 years), it may be difficult to recoup the cost of this investment.

***School boards should exercise caution in making long-term lease commitments due to the uncertainty of variables beyond their control such as enrolment, development and government policies that may impact school space requirements.***

## **Funding and Cost-Recovery**

Facility partnerships should not place any financial cost on school boards. In addition, facility partnerships should positively impact funding allocations to school boards. The policy currently proposes a reduction of the on-the-ground (OTG) capacity which will reduce funding to the school board and is in effect a “claw back” of rental revenue generated by the facility partnership. As an incentive for school boards to enter into facility partnerships, the OTG capacity should not be reduced and the ministry-rated-capacity (MRC) should be reduced. This approach would serve as an incentive to school boards in terms of facility partnerships.

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## **Funding for Community Agencies**

Experience indicates that facility partnership agreements usually require extensive administrative work and legal advice. Experience also indicates that many local community agencies and groups do not have the funding support to fully cover the capital and operating costs of a facility partnership with school boards. Many municipalities and community agencies indicate that they have insufficient funding to fully reimburse school boards for their facility costs. Community agencies and municipalities require sufficient funding to adequately cover their share of costs for facility partnerships with school boards.

***Facility partnerships with school boards should not negatively impact the funding that community agencies and associations receive or may be eligible for (e.g. The Ontario Trillium Foundation Grants).***

***Partnerships should be voluntary and locally initiated, not provincially mandated.***

## Property Tax Exemption

School facilities are exempt from local property taxes in accordance with *the Municipal Act*. Some school boards have reported that when their facilities are used extensively by local community agencies that local municipalities have considered reclassifying the school facility as a commercial property thereby removing the tax exemption.

***Facility partnerships should not impact the property tax exemption for school facilities.***

## Conclusion

In a perfect world...

Every school would have:

- ▶ State-of-the art instructional facility that meets current program requirements
- ▶ Child Care
- ▶ A community centre
- ▶ A library
- ▶ Seniors' services
- ▶ After school recreation/youth programs

This is a vision for the ideal community hub, something to aim for. In many communities this has been achieved. Unfortunately in some communities, schools that provided these supports to the community have been closed due to the impact of declining enrolment. However, there are examples where school boards have closed schools that are no longer required for students and then worked with the local community to preserve and enhance local community based programs. The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board closed Robert Land School in the Keith neighbourhood in Hamilton and then worked with the local community and the City of Hamilton to transform the school facility into the Eva Rothwell Community Centre.

Unfortunately these examples are few and far between. The Province needs to find a resolution to the contradictory elements: the encouragement of schools to be hubs in their community; and the pressures on school boards to close schools as enrolment falls.

OPSBA appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the facility partnership policy. We trust our comments will support the success of this initiative with school boards and their local communities.