



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

Ontario Public School Boards' Association

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April 17, 2013

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**OPSBA Submission on the Ontario PC Caucus White Paper,
Paths to Prosperity: Preparing Students for the Challenges of the
Twenty-First Century**

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) represents public district school boards across Ontario. Together our members serve the educational needs of almost 70% of Ontario's elementary and secondary school 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.

We are responding to your recently released white paper that focussed on education and included 18 "paths" or recommendations. As a context for our comments, we would like to identify our Association's key priorities which are designed to advocate for conditions that support and improve student achievement. OPSBA's leading priorities are:

- **The Whole Child:** *OPSBA believes that improving student achievement and student engagement is directly linked to ensuring that we work collaboratively for the social, emotional, mental and physical well-being of all children and youth.*
- **21st Century Education:** *OPSBA believes that preparing students for success in the 21st century means that our educational programs and instructional practices must incorporate the skills, attitudes, values and knowledge that are needed for today's complex global environment and reflect the contexts in which students live and learn.*
- **Trustees – Building Leadership Capacity:** *OPSBA believes that trustees make a significant and direct contribution to the achievement of all students through their leadership in directing the policies and priorities of the local school board that shape a culture of continuous improvement.*
- **Labour Relations:** *OPSBA believes that teachers and support staff deeply influence a positive and productive learning environment for students and are supported in this role through the peace and stability engendered by successfully negotiated collective agreements.*
- **Education Funding:** *OPSBA believes that strong and equitable education funding is a foundational factor in setting the conditions that promote and sustain student achievement.*

**OPSBA Submission on the Ontario PC Caucus White Paper,
Paths to Prosperity: Preparing Students for the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century
April 17, 2013**

Your white paper was discussed among our member boards via our two internal working groups that review policy development and education program documents. These groups comprise trustees from across the province and include First Nations representation. We are also aware that you and your staff have met with many school board trustees and employees and heard directly from many individuals within the education sector.

Before commenting on the specific paths or recommendation areas, we note that the white paper does not identify any proposed action related to student achievement among First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Our Association's priorities are very supportive of the infusion of First Nations, Métis and Inuit histories, cultures, traditions and perspectives throughout the Ontario Curriculum and in our learning and teaching practices as a strategy that promotes student achievement, not just for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, but for all students.

With regard to the content of this consultation document, we offer the following comments:

1. We need to raise our targets and our efforts on literacy and numeracy, so that all of our children have the twenty-first century skills they will need to succeed in work and life. We propose a new target of 90 per cent for competency on reading, writing and math.

*OPSBA Comment: We would suggest that a 90% target for level 3 achievement does not reflect the needs of our student population. Reading, writing and math are key areas of curricula but not every student demonstrates their success through high academic marks in these three areas alone. OPSBA feels it is important to take into account the whole child when we are defining success. We note, as well, the importance of fostering skills that prepare students for a highly connected global environment, skills that include creativity, collaboration and innovation. OPSBA has been a leader in its advocacy for 21st century skills and recently produced a paper entitled **A Vision for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age**.*

2. Focus our resources where they will do the most good. According to the Education Quality and Accountability Office, there are 300 elementary schools in which more than half of students fail to meet test standards, and that has been the situation for years. We will identify these schools and re-invest savings from elsewhere in the education system to improve their performance.

OPSBA Comment: We would suggest that representing this issue in terms of "more than half the students fail" does a disservice to the student body and the many ways students experience success. In numerical terms the provincial standard is achievement of 70 to 79 % (Level 3); Levels 1 and 2 range from 50% to 69%. The recommendation to find savings from "elsewhere in the education system" to re-invest in schools with low achievement results implies that there are savings to be found elsewhere and that the schools in question are not currently being supported. It would be important to identify where savings might come from so that it would be possible to determine the impact on students of reallocating funds. It would be important as well to determine where, and to what degree, there are struggling schools that are not receiving resources.

3. Review curriculum and teaching methods to boost literacy and numeracy skills in the applied stream. To expose students to more career-oriented options, promote and expand the specialist high skills major program in secondary school to provide quality job training for those not intending to go on to post-secondary education. Expand existing programs that begin trades training in the secondary schools,

**OPSBA Submission on the Ontario PC Caucus White Paper,
Paths to Prosperity: Preparing Students for the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century
April 17, 2013**

such as dual credits for college-level courses taken in secondary school. This approach will tighten the important links between Ontario's colleges and its secondary schools.

OPSBA Comment: We agree with the expansion of the specialist high skills major program and dual credit approaches as they have proven to offer viable and much needed options for many students. We support further investment in alternative pathways for students including access to trades training and continued collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities.

4. The current government says it has woven financial literacy into every aspect of the curriculum. That makes it difficult to measure results, if any. We will take the solid financial literacy work already done by groups like the Investment Funds Institute of Canada, the Jr. Economic Club of Canada, the Financial Planning Standards Council and Junior Achievement Canada and introduce it in a structured way into our schools beginning at the earliest levels so that all of our children will develop the critical life skill of managing their money. Understanding money is also a foundation for the entrepreneurship Ontario needs to succeed economically.

OPSBA Comment: OPSBA agrees that financial literacy is an important skill and our Association contributed to the province's 2010 consultations. We supported integration of financial literacy within existing curriculum and noted: "There already exist many expectations that are linked to financial literacy. Before adding new expectations, these should be reviewed in the interest of an integrated and cross curricular model with no new independent courses being added. Through this type of approach concepts can be built on and reinforced over time to create relevant areas of learning linked to everyday experiences of our students. Care and sensitivity needs to be incorporated into the planning to ensure that the diversity of students' socio-economic circumstances is respected."

5. Our schools need to produce well-rounded students, ready to deal with life. Schools need to do their part to combat childhood obesity and to prepare our children for the financial responsibilities that adulthood brings. Implement a strong curriculum in arts, physical education and financial literacy that will help students develop vital life skills.

OPSBA Comment: We agree that a strong curriculum should include the arts, physical education and, as previously noted, financial literacy. With regard to physical education we support a curriculum that is equally strong in health, sex education, mental health and social development, all of which are important in the path towards responsible adulthood. We support the continuing of and expanding, where possible, the funding that these areas currently receive.

6. Science education is vital to Ontario's economic future and it opens the door to well-paid careers. Science needs to be part of the basics. Stress the value of science education to students and measure our success with standardized testing of science in Grade 8.

OPSBA Comment: In our response to Path 1, we noted the importance of 21st century skills in innovation and creativity and would see the links with a vibrant Science curriculum. We do not believe that adding a standardized test for science is necessary. There are many ways to incorporate questions that are science-based into existing tests.

7. The bureaucratic culture of our education system won't change without transferring power to our schools. We should eliminate school superintendent positions that duplicate the work of principals and

**OPSBA Submission on the Ontario PC Caucus White Paper,
Paths to Prosperity: Preparing Students for the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century
April 17, 2013**

pass the power and responsibility to principals, who would report to directors of education and be accountable for managing most aspects of their school's operations.

OPSBA Comment: Our school system depends on a number of valued employees who each contribute to student success. Our principals are the face of their local schools and spend much of their time dealing directly with school-related issues and the implementation of day-to-day operations for their students and staff. They need to focus on this. If anything, principals are already overloaded with increased responsibility, supervision, discipline issues, and much administrative work. Superintendents do not perform the same work as a school principal. They have a unique leadership and coordination role within our boards and work with the Director of Education to ensure that each board's strategic plan to support student achievement and well-being is implemented.

Given the number of principals in the majority of school boards in the province, it is not feasible or in the best interest of the day-to-day operations in a school board that they could report directly to the Director of Education.

8. Allow principals and teachers, working as a team, more control over a range of in-school decisions including teaching methods, tailoring programs to meet the needs of their schools and making particular classes slightly larger or smaller.

OPSBA Comment: We support teamwork and acknowledge the strong degree of collaboration that currently occurs in schools. It is important to acknowledge, however, that principals and teachers have different roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. School boards would welcome flexibility around class sizes to suit their local needs.

9. Work with unions, principals, College of Teachers and school boards to adopt a definition of the academic work day that reflects what teachers already do, not the bare minimum defined in the contract. At a minimum, it must include timely and full report cards, meeting with parents and after-school help for those who need it.

OPSBA Comment: OPSBA considers that this is a matter best approached through collaboration, cooperation and meaningful talks with our education partners.

10. Our schools must offer the usual range of extracurricular activities. Give school boards and principals the flexibility to recognize and reward teachers for before and- after school involvement, such as through less supervisory time and relief from other duties. We will prevent unions from punishing teachers who want to help children. Principals should work with parent councils to find community volunteers for clubs and sports if a teacher is not available.

OPSBA Comment: We all agree that extracurricular activities can provide incredible benefits to many students and can add to a positive overall school experience. It should be acknowledged that it would be difficult to define "the usual range" of extracurricular activities since there is great variation from school to school and from region to region in the province based on interest, available skills and other criteria. The terms "reward" and "punish" are unnecessary when discussing a teacher's involvement in these activities. We do not consider it appropriate to characterize a decrease in supervision as a reward.

**OPSBA Submission on the Ontario PC Caucus White Paper,
Paths to Prosperity: Preparing Students for the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century
April 17, 2013**

Supervision is a necessary function of all adults in a school setting and leads to increased support for all students.

11. Phase out 10,000 non-teaching positions to save \$600 million, as recommended by the Drummond Commission. This will mean reducing Ontario's 82,000 non-teaching positions by 11.8 per cent. With an emphasis on students who need help the most like those with learning disabilities or special education needs, school boards should examine the role of people who work with these children carefully before proceeding with this Drummond recommendation.

OPSBA Comment: This recommendation is not based on a thorough understanding of the roles of support staff in Ontario schools. Many of the non-teaching positions suggested include educational workers whose skills are needed most in support of teaching and learning by students with exceptionalities. Support workers are employed to a great degree in Special Education programs, an area that has seen strong support in recent years and still requires further investment. Moreover, we are concerned that the number cited includes caretakers, school secretaries, bus drivers and other caring adults, all of whom provide necessary services and are part of the "school family" that supports students. Schools would not be able to operate without the help of such non-teaching staff. The more adults that are taken out of the school means less supervision, less safety and an erosion of a positive school climate.

12. There are two class size issues. One is the average class size across a whole school board. We should increase class sizes modestly to save \$460 million, as recommended by the Drummond Commission. We should also give principals the scope to vary class sizes in their individual schools, as long as the board remains within provincial averages.

OPSBA Comment: We would support a conversation about changing the class size caps in order to allow school boards more flexibility. Class size caps could be increased modestly without affecting learning outcomes.

13. Delay expansion of full-day kindergarten until the budget is balanced. Conduct a thorough review of the benefits achieved by the program so far before proceeding with a full rollout.

OPSBA Comment: The Full-Day Kindergarten program has shown significant and very positive results in our schools to date and some preliminary data reveal significant findings with respect to increased social competence, language and cognition, communication and general knowledge. The efficacy of the program in terms of social, emotional, physical and economic health over the life cycle is borne out in highly respected international research. Delaying the implementation of Full day Kindergarten would be a retrograde step for the future of this province.

Last December a special report from TD Economic highlighted the support for early childhood education stating, "not only do high-quality early childhood education programs benefit children, they also have positive impacts on parents and the economy as a whole."

14. Alter full-day kindergarten staffing to redirect at least \$200 million to other pressing needs like helping children with learning disabilities who are falling behind grade level in reading, writing and math and who fail to graduate from secondary school, as well as contributing to eliminate the yearly deficit.

OPSBA Comment: We do not support altering the FDK staffing model. Both the elementary teacher and the qualified ECE bring unique and important skills to the teaching and learning of young children. This

**OPSBA Submission on the Ontario PC Caucus White Paper,
Paths to Prosperity: Preparing Students for the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century
April 17, 2013**

is a key factor in the success of the program. The foundation provided to children in the FDK program promotes the prospect of higher levels of achievement in future grades and we would suggest that altering the successful staffing model the program would run counter to the intent of this Path/Recommendation.

15. Help sustain our rural schools by having more than one school board share a building where required. Use twenty-first century technology in secondary schools to knock down artificial barriers so that children in rural schools have access to all the same courses that those in the city do.

OPSBA Comment: We consider that there is considerable scope for sharing of facilities and support sharing where it is feasible. We agree on the importance of technology to support our students in rural schools and would like to see more staff support for e-learning courses in those schools.

16. Creatively expand the use of school buildings outside regular school hours. Make them community learning hubs that benefit the entire community, not just the students enrolled there.

OPSBA Comment: Many schools have community partners using their schools after hours and we are fully supportive of having schools as the community hub for many activities. We agree that the use of schools needs to be cost-effective for both the user and the school.

17. Children in high growth suburbs deserve the same access to schools as children everywhere else. Build schools in new subdivisions sooner, and work with other levels of government and community organizations to make them more than just a school.

OPSBA Comment: We agree that better planning can and should occur to meet the needs of our communities. We continue to advocate for better communications between school boards and their local municipalities.

18. Start a student safety protocol that begins with a comprehensive bill to deal with every aspect of the bullying problem.

OPSBA Comment: OPSBA was supportive of the introduction of province-wide legislation that addressed bullying prevention and intervention and notes that the final bill included many pieces from the Progressive Conservative Bill 14, Anti-Bullying Act. The ministry has recently released a model Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan that boards can use and adapt locally. We suggest that we gain experience with and evaluate the efficacy of these measures before revisiting the legislation.

As an Association that represents public school boards in Ontario, we appreciate the opportunity to provide our feedback on the recommendations contained in the **Paths To Prosperity** white paper and would welcome having discussions with you on the content we have provided.

Sincerely,



Michael Barrett,
President