



**ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION**

Leading Education's Advocates

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October 15, 2013

The Honourable Teresa Piruzza
Minister of Children and Youth Services
14th Floor
56 Wellesley Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S3

Dear Minister Piruzza,

Re: OPSBA Submission on Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) represents the province's 31 public district school boards. Together our members serve the educational needs of almost 70% of Ontario's elementary and secondary students. In addition to advocacy on behalf of Ontario students, our Association provides services to school boards and to school trustees who are elected to public office through Municipal elections. We are an organization that has a strong history of advocacy and have consistently participated in consultation around many pieces of legislation that affect our members.

We applaud the government for renewing its commitment to reduce poverty and appreciate the opportunity to provide input into the current consultations on the next phase of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy. OPSBA has been working with Ontario Campaign 2000 in the dissemination of information about the recent community-based consultations hosted by local MPPs. Many of our trustees attended these sessions, as well as members of our association's staff. We encouraged trustees to provide feedback online and our internal trustee working groups discussed this issue at their September meeting.

Mobilizing this degree of involvement on our part has entailed vigilance and collaboration with partner organizations to discover where consultations were taking place. It is unfortunate that there has been no central posting of a consultation schedule and that in a large number of cases the notice from local MPPs to communities was extremely short. Our sense is that there are areas of the province that have been missed entirely. We feel the deficiencies of the process will have resulted in many voices not being heard and the loss of important input from citizens and groups who care deeply about reducing poverty in our province.

One of our association's main priorities is The Whole Child. We believe that improving student achievement and student engagement is directly linked to providing for the social, emotional, mental and physical well-being of all children and youth. Poverty is not a stand-alone issue. We firmly believe that successful poverty reduction strategies call for strong levels of collaboration among all the provincial ministries that deal with children and families, among all levels of government and involve partnerships with community agencies.

Our members -- trustees and schools boards -- see first-hand, through teachers and principals, the effects of poverty in our classrooms. This is a key issue for school boards where children spend a large part of their day either in our classrooms or in before-and-after school programming. In terms of legislative responsibilities, the *Education Act* stipulates that trustees and school boards are responsible for student well-being as well as student achievement. Indeed the two are inextricably linked. In embracing that responsibility, school boards are strong advocates for conditions that alleviate poverty. This would, in turn, support student success. Poverty directly impacts a child's readiness to learn and access to a full education experience contributes to a level playing field for all children. The 1998 ISARC Audit provided a telling description that relates the effects of poverty on a child's experience of school. "*Poverty is: Not having breakfast sometimes; being afraid to tell your mom that you need new shoes; sometimes really hard because my mom gets scared and she cries; not being able to take swimming lessons; not getting to go on school trips; being teased about the way you are dressed*" (Grade 4 & 5 children - ISARC (The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition): 1998) Fifteen years on we are still seeing too much of this. Fear and deprivation at this basic level should be unheard of in a country as prosperous as Canada and we all have to work to eliminate it.

When *Breaking the Cycle: Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy* was launched in 2008, it had a strong focus on children (funding to support community hub programs, after school programs, skills training and mentorship programs for youth, student nutrition programs and the implementation of FDK in low income neighbourhoods as an initial focus). We agreed at that time that any strategies developed to reduce poverty should put children first because a solid start in life for them is an investment in hope and in future prosperity. A full body of research supports this. It is the wisest long-term investment our society can make. Education supports people in moving out of poverty and is directly linked to acquiring secure employment and enjoying better health throughout the life cycle.

At that time we also stated,

"We know that poverty is felt in all corners of the province....A consistent message from community to community is that schools, which are very much the hub of that community, are seeing the effects first hand. Our school trustees report the visible strain on students, parents, teachers and the life of the school -- both inside and out of the classroom. The situation worsens as the current economic climate takes its toll. It is seen in the increased stress in the home, the fear in families that parents will lose their jobs, the growing need for breakfast and nutrition programs, the fall-off of volunteers in schools and the erosion of fundraising capacity that affects all the extras a school can provide.

Families are making hard choices and settling on basic household priorities that can result in loss of opportunities for children."

School boards see themselves as a key part of the solution when addressing issues that affect the opportunities for children and youth to achieve their full potential in school and in life. Common themes continue to focus on the promotion of literacy supports, homework clubs, student success initiatives, youth mentorship, early learning, nutrition programs, after school and recreation programs. These are not frills; they are essential to giving children equitable life chances.

Most recently we also provided comment to the Healthy Kids Report. Among the recommendations were requests to establish a universal school nutrition program for all Ontario publicly funded elementary and secondary schools and to establish a universal school nutrition program for First Nations communities. We stated:

“OPSBA would most definitely support a universal program for all schools. Right now there are a great number of programs operating in schools across the province. However, these programs have diverse and inconsistent levels of service and support. Some schools have better access to resources, charitable programs and parental support, in terms of both time and funding, than others. Many families cannot afford to provide daily meals and snacks that align with Canada's Food Guide. An equitable, universal, fully funded program would resolve inequities, inconsistencies and offer a solid foundation for all students.”

Another report recommendation focussed on making schools hubs for child health and community engagement. We have been advocating for continued and expanded funding of the Community Use of Schools Grant. This would allow school boards the flexibility to charge reasonable permit rates and pay for utilities and cleaning. We will continue to advocate for this during our discussions with the Ministry of Education and in our brief with regard to next year's Grants for Student Needs.

With full day kindergarten (FDK) entering its final years of implementation, we would also point out the importance of linkages between child care centres and schools. We have always been supportive of the benefits of FDK and the ability for teachers and schools to offer early intervention strategies to those that need it. These can also be applied to child care and we encourage the government to continue to put a priority on more affordable, quality child care for Ontario families. The amount of fee subsidies available does not match the number of children living in poverty who would benefit from licensed child care. One of many examples is Hamilton where there are only fee subsidies for 40% of the poorest children (*Hamilton and District Social Planning and Research Council*). This also means that extended care offered for FDK children is not accessible to all. Affordable and accessible licensed child care in Quebec has allowed women to return to the work force, reducing poverty there by 50%. Public education is a universal right in Ontario and it should apply no less to child care services.

Any consideration of poverty reduction strategies must have a particular focus on the most vulnerable communities. New Canadians, people with disabilities, and Aboriginal communities are at a higher risk of poverty and this is particularly true for children within those communities. The 2006 Census reported that close to 25% of people with communication/intellectual disabilities live in poverty; this compares with a poverty rate of just under 10% for people without disabilities. Close to half of Aboriginal children in Canada are poor and many of them have very young parents who have not been able to complete their education. As noted earlier, education is critical to ensuring that people have security of income and have a healthy lifestyle.

Childhood poverty also increases risks for not identifying issues with vision, hearing, and speech. The failure to identify and take action affects educational opportunities. This is among the reasons we advocate for services in schools and increased presence of local Public Health Nurses, for example. These professionals have a role in health promotion in schools and we

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see them as an additional frontline service that can help in early prevention/intervention strategies and simply be another supportive adult in the school setting. We would emphasize, above all, that identification of need must go hand in hand with a plan to provide services to meet those needs. We would suggest that the *Model Schools for Inner Cities* initiative, first undertaken by the Toronto District School Board in 2005 to provide inner city students with the same choices as all children in Toronto, offers insights into the benefits of a more integrated approach to supporting children and youth. The most recent research results are at: <http://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/Community/ModelSchools/Final%20Results.pdf> and reveal a sustained narrowing of the opportunity gap experienced by young people living in poverty.

Currently there are separate consultations on Poverty Reduction taking place in the sectors of Education and Health and under the umbrella of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. We urge all three Ministries to work together, both with one another and with other levels of government and with community partners, on the results of these consultations so that the strategies that are ultimately developed will be cohesive and integrated and, therefore, more effective and powerful in improving the conditions for children and youth and for all Ontarians.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Barrett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Michael Barrett
President, OPSBA

cc. The Honourable Liz Sandals, Minister of Education