



ONTARIO PUBLIC
SCHOOL BOARDS'
ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates

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Laurie French
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To: The Honourable Mitzie Hunter
Minister of Education

Re: Rural and Remote Education Review and Discussion Paper

Ontario's *Education Act* outlines several duties for school boards including the promotion of student achievement and well-being, as well as ensuring the effective stewardship of the board's resources. This current discussion regarding rural and remote education in our province is timely as many of our member boards are doing their best to deliver quality programming in their schools while facing financial challenges, aging infrastructure and declining enrolment. Several have been involved in or are in the midst of Pupil Accommodation Reviews, and have to make tough decisions about long-term program and accommodation plans, including school consolidations and closures. These challenges are often complicated by the misperception of some that creating community hubs is a quick fix for school closures.

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) appreciates this opportunity to provide feedback to the Ministry of Education on its recent Ontario Rural Education Strategy Consultation and its "[Support Students and Communities Discussion Paper to Strengthen Education in Ontario's Rural and Remote Communities.](#)"

We fundamentally support the Ministry's efforts to consult with various communities in Ontario – with a goal of meeting, listening and acquiring a first-hand account on improving support for rural and remote communities and ensuring our students have access to a full range of learning opportunities and are making the best use of public resources.

However, it must be understood that in rural and remote areas, the closure of a school may have a definite and lasting impact on the overall community. The closure of a key business or economic contributor also has a significant impact. The bigger discussion should be about how we, as a collective, enable our smaller towns and communities to survive and prosper.



Many of our members attended the afternoon and evening consultation sessions and provided us with their reflections on the meetings and feedback on the discussions. In reviewing the comments, we noticed common themes in their responses. What follows below is a summary of the consolidated feedback.

Communication, Location and Timing of Consultations

- Trustees were appreciative of having staff from a variety of ministries attend. However, Ministry staff sometimes outnumbered the invited guests.
- There was an overall lack of timely consultation information and invitation details given to school boards and the community about the daytime and evening sessions.
- There were logistical issues that made it challenging, including changes of location and not sharing information in a responsive way.
- There was confusion as to who exactly was to attend the daytime session – school board staff, elected officials, and/or student trustees.
- Many stakeholders were frustrated by the timing of the consultations. There were 10 consultations packed between May 5 and May 26 with little lead time, with several on a Friday evening.
- It was felt that conducting a meeting in a town such as Lakefield to talk about remote communities diminishes those that are truly remote. Although the locations were chosen because of recent and current school closings, it was suggested that better locations could have been explored.
- Evening sessions were extremely difficult to attend for many. Many locations were a far distance for attendees with nowhere to spend the night and too long of a drive.
- People attended the evening session hoping that local processes could be stopped and were frustrated when the facilitator tried to redirect them to the questions in the discussion paper.

In spite of the logistical and communication challenges, OPSBA member boards were well-represented at the 10 engagement sessions to ensure the voices of trustees and school boards were heard.

Purpose of Consultations

- There is a perception that the government's consultation meetings were not entirely meaningful and were only being held as a public relations exercise. Many felt the consultation sessions were not useful and nothing new was learned.
- Additionally, there is a perception that these consultations will impact school accommodation decisions made recently or in progress.
- Some attendees felt the Ministry staff were too defensive of government decisions.

- Many attendees still do not believe the Ministry staff truly understands rural issues or the local landscape.
- It must be understood that funding has already changed/reduced, faster than boards can complete ARCS, and a moratorium would place boards in financial difficulty

Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG) Process

- The PARG process often creates an environment that calls into question public confidence in the decision making of trustees by other stakeholders. The process is divisive for school communities under review, and Municipalities often take opposition to, rather than seeking partnership opportunities earlier or in advance of the process.
- The process can cause stress on school board front line and support staff who are worried about whether or not they will continue to have employment. Community members have also expressed concerns regarding the well-being of their children as anxiety levels are high.
- The revised guidelines are not recognized as reflecting Ministry policy, adding to the animosity in communities and lack of confidence
- The process often leads to a perceived responsibility of school boards to fund community services and development outside their mandate

“I think the biggest thing that came out of the evening meeting was around communication. Members of the felt as though they had put a lot of time and effort into their working teams with very little time to do the work, and information sent to them hours before the meetings. The working teams felt that their recommendations were disregarded by the senior teams. They challenged the ministry on “old and outdated facts about costing, buildings, and school enrolment.””

School Board Chair

Roles of School Boards and Municipalities

- There continues to be misunderstandings about the roles and responsibilities of boards and municipalities as related to their respective elected officials.
- School boards and municipalities should be better enabled and encouraged to work together successfully. Government and various Acts (legislation) often make it difficult to mesh work effectively.
- There should be an expectation or mandate for more meaningful and two-way consultation meetings between school boards and municipalities, staff and elected officials as community partners.
- Our municipal counterparts are not necessarily aware of the board-mandated process for Pupil Accommodation Reviews. (Boards must follow a Ministry of Education Guideline)
- Suggestions for better communications with community partners, particularly with regards to municipal staff and elected officials.

“I sat on accommodation review committees that have studied many communities and many schools. I will assure you right now this is not an easy job for trustees around the table. As a council, we have absolutely no authority as to what happens around that table.”

Current Councillor and former School Board Trustee

“We had some interesting conversation with the municipality at our table. I would say that there are some misunderstandings about the roles of boards and municipalities and also the responsibilities and that one thing that could emerge from this process is a better understanding and hopefully a plan for communication. This is a provincial need.”

Director of Education

Community Hubs

- At present, school boards, especially smaller boards, cannot afford a dedicated person to source partners or respond to inquiries and manage the partnerships. A community hubs coordinator needs to be funded by the government.
- There is a greater need to share best practices, break down silos and have a designated coordinator to facilitate cooperation/partnerships/hubs at the provincial level (this has been partially addressed with the launch of communityhubsontario.ca, but more needs to be done).
- Additional support services for our communities could be facilitated at schools, particularly around those that support students and their families.
- Parents need to be assured that their children are safely supervised. Simply opening the doors of schools to anyone is not always palatable or acceptable to parents, especially in elementary schools.
- Potential partners are very much interested in figuring out practical things such as parking, property management and air conditioning.
- Funding cycles across Ministries need flexibility to carry forward money to look to future shared space opportunities, so they can truly come to a partnership with shared resources.

Funding

- Trustees questioned the rationale for capital funding decisions. For instance, why would funding be awarded for new builds in rural areas when an existing facility can accommodate students from multiple boards? There needs to be more incentive and support from the Ministry of Education to encourage school boards to work together and share space. Some school boards experiencing declining enrolment have long been open to this but other boards that do not experience the same pressures have no incentive for partnerships. When they are awarded funding to build a school for fewer students than a board might be forced to close a school. There is a conspicuous waste of our resources.
- There is no provision given for any increase in transportation costs when a school closes. A ministry policy forces an area of deficit not created by the board.
- The Ministry should provide more clarity on the criteria for funding approval prior to a final pupil accommodation review decision by a Board. There have been changes to the funding rules and criteria that the Ministry considers. More clarity will result in better informed decisions by Trustees and Boards can have confidence in the business plans they submit to the Ministry.
- Schools have great success in community use, and are willing partners to viable community hub opportunities, but the current funding still does not cover additional costs to host partners and communities do not understand this when they wish to access these community facilities.
- The current distance calculation between schools does not take into consideration busing time for students.
- It was expressed that the funding formula does not recognize the highly skilled and highly technical needs of a rural farming community.

“Many boards have noted their struggles with the complete elimination in top-up funding. This seems to be putting extraordinary pressure on boards to close all “excess” space and even remove some programs from having dedicated space in schools. OPSBA recommends the ministry review the current plan which is to completely eliminate top-up funding.”

Ontario Public School Boards’ Association [Brief re: 2017-18 Education Funding](#)



In addition to the above feedback, OSPBA offers commentary on the questions posed in the Discussion Paper.

LEVERAGING SCHOOL SPACE/COMMUNITY HUBS

OPSBA detailed its recommendations regarding community hubs and school space in two submissions to the government, dated [June 26, 2015](#), and [December 18, 2015](#). Some of the recommendations included in those submissions are included below:

1. What steps can the provincial government, municipal governments, and community partners take to better support early and collaborative community planning to make the most of all public resources, including schools?

- Working partnerships are very important, as is municipal support and cooperation. All involved organizations have to share a common vision and values and work to foster trusting relationships between community partners and the school.
- The government should determine a set of minimal common data/information to be used in local communities, aligned to the purpose of each individual community hub to determine where hubs should be located. Long-term sustainability and ability to continually adapt services to fit community needs must be taken into consideration.
- Aligned funding cycles between potential partners would be helpful.
- The government could mandate integrated/collaborative community planning between all school board, municipal and other relevant local organizations. Provincially funded facilitators would be useful. School boards should have funds to dedicate staff to finding and creating appropriate community hub locations, where needed.
- The new online Community Hubs Resource Network, if promoted properly and extensively to relevant stakeholders, should provide a great opportunity for collaboration in local communities.

2. Where the will exists for community partnerships, what are the hurdles to effectively implement, and how can governments, school boards and partners work to overcome them?

- 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.
- When utilizing schools as community hubs, building management during the months of July and August must be considered, as school principals are the designated site managers. As well, there is concern that additional site management could take away from the primary responsibilities of a principal.
- School boards must receive funding for renovations and site management when a community hub is located within a school board site. Smaller boards, in particular, do not have large planning departments or the resources to coordinate the community development and ongoing maintenance of substantive hubs. The creation of any new school board employee positions will require consideration of collective agreements with education sector unions.

3. What are the opportunities for school boards to share space in your area? What do you see as the obstacles?

- Many of our members share space with like-minded partners, including co-terminous school boards, child care operators, libraries and community centres. School boards are often willing to share spaces, provided the partner organization is appropriate for an institution delivering education to K-12 students.
- The obstacles include student safety concerns, building security, infrastructure needs, and education funding and budget cycles.
- The funding formula doesn't always allow for funds to provide space to host community partners (e.g. day cares) which would demonstrate some genuine commitment to hubs
- One of the barriers to the creation of community hubs that meet a school board's educational needs has been 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. This has been partially addressed with the May 2016 funding announcement to retrofit existing space and improve accessibility in schools to support greater use by communities, but funding needs remain.

4. What should the provincial government and school boards be doing to ensure that opportunities to co-operate are supported?

The Ministry should:

- Provide school boards with greater incentives to partner with other "community-oriented" services, e.g. seniors' centres, child care, community centres and fitness and wellness facilities.
- Allow funding to be used to repurpose facilities and align funding cycles.

School Boards should:

- Through their associations, establish regular communications with key stakeholders including AMO, Public Health, library boards, etc.
- Review the revised Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline and local board policies to ensure that Community Hubs are considered and part of the discussion.
- Develop a strategic plan with a specific focus on establishing hubs in schools (where it makes sense and fulfills a community needs) to support students and families (based on agreed-upon common data/information that shows where current hubs are located and gaps). The plan should be developed in conjunction with local municipalities and support agencies.

PUPIL ACCOMMODATION REVIEWS IN RURAL ONTARIO

1. How can the Province best support a meaningful conversation about the impact of schools on local communities and student well-being through the pupil accommodation review process?

- Pupil accommodation reviews are one of the most difficult issues that school boards and trustees face. They are undertaken with thoughtful planning and meaningful community involvement and with due regard for local circumstances and continued student achievement and well-being, which is the primary focus of school boards. School boards understand what is happening at the local level and can best determine the value and recognition of a school in a community. The Province needs to value that local knowledge and provide support to boards (restoration of Local Priorities Grant and flexibility to manage local needs, e.g. programs/services).
- It would be helpful for the Province to clarify the advisory roles, responsibilities and participation of municipalities/elected members and school community members (parents/ratepayers) in the pupil accommodation review process for all stakeholders to ensure an engaging and transparent process and that school boards are the final decision-making body.

2. How can the Province ensure that the feedback from the community is given full consideration, and that this input is reflected in the review process?

- All community input is reviewed, given full consideration and reflected in the review process. School boards, as mandated, follow the current Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline (PARG), which prescribes an open and transparent consultation process and communication to all stakeholders (parents, municipalities, etc.).
- As outlined in the PARG, solicitation of community input by school boards is conducted throughout the review process, reviewed and analyzed by staff and shared publicly with stakeholders in the three Staff Reports. The Board of Trustees reviews all three Staff Reports, containing all the community feedback, before making its final decision.

REORGANIZATION OF FUNDING

1. What is working well now to help students in small and rural communities have a positive learning experience and quality education? What could be improved?

For rural and remote boards, we continue to advocate for the conditions that maximize the learning conditions for our students. In our letter (dated December 9, 2016), OPSBA identified several specific recommendations for consideration concerning the North (some of which, may be of benefit to our rural and remote boards.) These included:

- The ministry addressing the loss in “top up” dollars in the North (and rural and remote boards) where schools cannot be closed due to severe community impacts
- Increasing in-school specialized supports for students (social workers, child and youth workers, special education staff, mental health workers etc.)
- Dedicated early intervention teachers and support staff to close the literacy and numeracy gaps

- Transportation subsidy to support experiential learning opportunities for students
- Continued and increased support for education programs for indigenous students in rural and remote school boards
- Continued and increased support of transitions for students (e.g. students in care, in poverty)

The loss of top-up funding, combined with declining enrolment and the increasing challenge to offer quality programming equates to an equity issue for students in rural and remote schools that boards must continually grapple with.

2. How could the Province best recognize and address the unique funding needs of your region and community through the funding formula?

- Boards continue to stress the need for local flexibility in order to balance their operating budgets and meet local unique cost pressures and needs. OPSBA reiterates its recommendation from its January 2017 Submission regarding the 2017-2018 Grants for Student Needs for the ministry to re-establish the Local Priorities Grant which can be used to support specific local board initiatives and funding challenges.

OPSBA Recommendations/Reminders

Communication:

- As we recommended in our [Submission re: the revised PARG](#) in December 2014, we once again reiterate the importance and need for a comprehensive strategy to clearly communicate the PARG process to all stakeholders involved – trustees, senior board staff, municipal partners and community members. This communication should also include parent involvement councils, school councils and principals.
- School accommodation issues are cross-sectoral and school boards will continue to need the leadership of the Ministry of Education to ensure that all stakeholders are receiving the same messaging. We would, for example, see a role for Ministry of Education to liaise with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing and Ministry of Infrastructure to ensure that similar messaging is communicated to all impacted stakeholders.
- If there are any changes to the PARG as a result of the consultations, a Q&A on key changes should be developed from stakeholders specific to the revisions.

Pupil Accommodation Review Process:

- The final report should emphasize that school boards are mandated by legislation and follow the process as set out by the Ministry of Education in the PARG.
- School boards should be given a time frame within which to undertake any relevant changes to their Pupil Accommodation Review policies as a result of any revisions to the PARG.

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Provincial clarification and direction is needed on the advisory role and responsibilities of municipalities (staff and elected members) before, during and after a Pupil Accommodation Review process. Their roles should be clearly communicated to municipalities through their

Ministry and its stakeholder associations (Association of Municipalities of Ontario – AMO, Rural Ontario Municipal Association – ROMA). It should also be underscored for municipalities that school boards are the final decision-making body in a pupil accommodation review process. This should not be left open to interpretation by any stakeholder group.

- Recommend the Ministry’s Guide to Pupil Accommodation Reviews be revised to include a section on the role and responsibilities of municipalities and elected officials during a pupil accommodation review process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurie French". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Laurie French
President

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