



**ONTARIO PUBLIC  
SCHOOL BOARDS'  
ASSOCIATION**

**Leading Education's Advocates**

**Ontario Public School Boards' Association**  
439 University Avenue, 18th Floor  
Toronto, ON M5G 1Y8  
Tel: (416) 340-2540  
Fax: (416) 340-7571  
webmaster@opsba.org  
www.opsba.org

Cathy Abraham  
President

W.R. (Rusty) Hick  
Executive Director

November 30, 2020

**Honourable Stephen Lecce  
Minister of Education**

Dear Minister Lecce,

You will recall speaking to the members of the Indigenous Trustees' Council (ITC) in August of 2019. The ITC meets throughout the year, and we review and affirm our core priorities at these meetings. You will also recall that when we spoke together last fall, as the Chair of the ITC, I shared these priorities and indicated that we represented the interests of Indigenous students in Ontario public school boards. In your first conversation with us, you indicated that we shared mutual priorities as advocates for Indigenous students across Ontario. Council members take their responsibilities very seriously and are the closest public education representatives to First Nations communities across the province. Like all communities and school boards, our work has unfortunately been impacted by the COVID pandemic. However, unique to First Nations and Indigenous students, the COVID pandemic and its impact have far greater consequences and expose vulnerabilities that mainstream families in Ontario do not experience. For many First Nations and their children, these vulnerabilities are a daily reality.

Minister, we feel it is important to raise serious concerns about the supports and equitable access to opportunities for our Indigenous students. Broadband and access to Wi-Fi remain a serious challenge for our students. If Indigenous students do not have reliable access to online and remote learning, how can they possibly access virtual school instruction and contact with their teachers? Many First Nations have determined (as is their right), to restrict access in and out of their communities during the pandemic to protect their families and residents. As a result, the ability to speak with and be in contact with their schools and teachers is greatly reduced. A lack of technology in many First Nations homes means that even accessing remote learning is impossible, and as a result students who are already historically disadvantaged face additional obstacles to learning and their education.

The ITC is a unique committee, representing a marginalized group of students that we have not just a professional obligation to, but an ethical one too. We are calling on you to consider supporting and providing additional resources for universal and unrestricted broadband access. We also ask you to ensure that appropriate children's mental health supports are made readily available, even virtually where they are most needed, in First Nations homes. Finally, we request that your Ministry review what technology needs are required to truly ensure equity of access and accessibility for Indigenous students.

As Board representatives for our respective district school boards and who are charged with the responsibility of representing Indigenous students in Ontario's public education system, we are not only advocates for our children, but also a tremendous resource and asset for you in your role. We ask that you allow us to arrange a virtual meeting with you, to discuss and strategize how to address these challenges, and call on you to provide relief to so many of our communities and our young people, during this incredibly difficult time.

Che-Miigwech, Respectfully,



Elaine Johnston  
Chair, OPSBA's Indigenous Trustees Council, and Trustee, Algoma District School Board

*The Ontario Public School Boards' Association represents English public district school boards and public school authorities across Ontario, which together serve more than 1.3 million public elementary and secondary students. The Association advocates on behalf of the best interests and needs of the public school system in Ontario. OPSBA is seen as the credible voice of public education in Ontario and is routinely called on by the provincial government for input and advice on legislation and the impact of government policy directions.*