



**ONTARIO PUBLIC  
SCHOOL BOARDS'  
ASSOCIATION**

**Leading Education's Advocates**

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February 2, 2023

To: Ernie Hardeman, MPP, Chair of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs  
Vanessa Kattar, Clerk of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

Re: 2023 Pre-Budget Consultations

Dear MPP Hardeman and Members of the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs:

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA) would like to take this additional opportunity to provide our education-related considerations for the 2023 pre-budget consultations. Last December we shared our detailed recommendations for education funding to the Minister of Education as part of the consultations for the Grants for Student Needs (GSN).

An internal survey of our member boards indicated that the top funding priorities are: Capital and Facilities; Children and Youth Mental Health; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Special Education; and Student Transportation.

In addition to this submission, we were fortunate to have our Indigenous Trustees' Council Chair Elaine Johnston recently address the Standing Committee in Sault Ste. Marie. As well, our President Cathy Abraham has requested to speak at the session held in Toronto on February 14, 2023.

Please note that we have been encouraging our members to participate in the Ministry of Finance's provincial budget consultations by taking part in the online survey and/or sharing their written feedback with the Ministry of Finance.

Sincerely,

Cathy Abraham  
President, Ontario Public School Boards' Association

*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.*



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# **OPSBA Submission Regarding the 2023-24 Education Funding Consultation Guide and Grants for Student Needs (GSN)**

**2023-2024**



## Advocating for the Whole Child and Student Well-Being

### **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)**

Ontario's public education system plays a critical role in providing educational leadership, instruction, support and pathways to ensure equitable access, opportunities and outcomes for all students. This commitment relies on the continuous analysis of learning outcomes for all students in order to support critical rights-based, identity affirming, anti-racist analysis of past practices and innovating diverse, decolonized, new approaches. The experiences of student learning during the pandemic have shed a stronger light on the latent effects of historic patterns of discrimination, which further underscores the urgency of this work.



OPSBA recommends the Ministry of Education develop an updated three-to-five-year Equity Action plan that prioritizes funding for the following:

#### *Research and Data*

- Expand the mandatory collection of disaggregated race-based data to include all other dimensions of diversity and provide dedicated funding for the full modernization of administrative data collection, tracking, and reporting tools, including funding to support evidence-based outcomes for the Board Improvement and Equity Plan (BIEP).

#### *Safety and Human Rights*

- Continue to increase funding to support dedicated staff, policies and programs focused on human rights, equity, anti-racism, accessibility, safety, inclusion and diversity. Develop standard best practices for evidence-based strategies for identifying, assessing and responding appropriately to human rights concerns, harassment, and discrimination.

#### *Leadership Capacity Education and Assessment*

- Fund the development and implementation of anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, anti-racism, anti-oppression, human rights, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility capacity building and competency standards.

### **Mental Health Supports**

OPSBA continues to support the implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated mental health and addictions strategy. With long-standing data indicating that approximately one in five children and youth in Ontario have a mental health challenge, early investments in school-based mental health and addictions services will yield long-term benefits for the health care system and the wellness of students and future generations. Currently, due to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the prevalence of mental health issues among students and staff has risen significantly.

A number of studies have documented the increased prevalence of mental health concerns among children and youth during the pandemic (e.g., Sick Kids Hospital, 2021). When coupled with a recent report by Children's Mental Health Ontario (2020) showing increasing wait times for mental health services, these data confirm the growing need for services provided by mental health professionals in schools and elsewhere. Similarly, there are recent reports from school boards suggesting a dramatic increase in the number and severity of mental health concerns. It is also important to emphasize the need for further efforts and strategies to support staff mental health at all levels in the education sector.

These realities necessitate the development of a staged three-to-five-year strategic Grants for Student Needs based funding plan to support school boards, schools, educators, students, parents/guardians, and families as they transition from the COVID-19 school experience.

From a healthy classroom perspective there has never been more evidence to support the compelling need to balance and integrate curricular and mental health and well-being expectations into every classroom. School transformation over the next five-to-10 years must incorporate this as a critical underpinning. Although the primary responsibility resides with the Ministry of Education, inter-ministerial collaboration is essential to remedy a fractured and significantly underfunded continuum of care.

Mental health and equitable student outcomes are inextricably linked. A strong pre-condition for all school-based mental health services are school boards and schools that operate through an anti-racism and anti-oppressive stance. It is important to ensure that interventions are culturally responsive or can be transformed to meet the needs of the students served. For this work to be effectively incorporated into daily practice, there must be training and resources for all staff, which will require funding and resource development.

All of the recommendations below reflect long-standing mental health and well-being needs at the school, system, and community level, which were exacerbated during the pandemic, raising concerns over a longer-term impact. There needs to be a collective understanding that mental health and well-being requires a sustained predictable commitment of government funding to effectively address the increased need for supports and services for students, staff, and families for the foreseeable future.

The recent position paper by the Ontario Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health, *Let's Put our Heads Together 2022*, provides the evidence-based research that supports all of the following education-focused recommendations.

OPSBA recommends:

- The ministry continue to annually increase the funding for School Mental Health Ontario's (SMHO) infrastructure to reflect current system needs and long-term sustainability.
- The ministry/government commit to ongoing investment in policies and programs that increase access to culturally appropriate, identity-affirming, anti-oppressive, and inclusive mental health supports and services for children and youth across Ontario.
- The ministry/government work with all system partners and equity-deserving communities to develop a coordinated provincial data strategy that provides systematic information about the prevalence of child and youth mental health issues in Ontario, inequities experienced by disadvantaged groups, and the experiences and outcomes of children and youth receiving services.
- As part of this effort, we recommend the ministry/government commit to sustained funding of the Ontario Child Health Survey, and in collaboration with research partners, increase the frequency of the survey's administration (for example, on a five-year cycle).
- That the equivalent funding of a full-time position be implemented in all 72 school boards for each of the next three years for a designated School Board Staff Mental Health Lead to

coordinate with the student mental health lead in support of healthy classrooms. Professional learning, training and provincial coordination should be integral to support this position (\*see rationale in Appendix A).

- The ministry/government work with all system partners to pilot implementation of the system of care described in *Right time, right care: Strengthening Ontario's mental health and addictions system of care for children and young people* (School and Community System of Care Collaborative, 2022).
- A continued focus on expanding school-based resources, supports and services (e.g., mental health promotion, early identification, prevention and intervention) for children, youth and their families.
- Reviewing the already overcrowded Ontario curriculum to include and appropriately balance student mental health and well-being expectations with other learning expectations. Curriculum revisions require sufficient implementation time, resources, professional learning and training with an appropriate balance of expectations.
- Prioritizing funding to support sustained, ongoing, incremental, iterative professional development opportunities (e.g., job-embedded approaches, a coaching model) to eliminate the negative schooling outcomes associated with all forms of historic systemic discrimination. This is a precondition for culturally responsive, identity-affirming mental health support.
- A continued increase in the number of school-based mental health professionals (social workers, psychologists, guidance counsellors, child and youth workers, and school mental health workers) to address the significant increase in the number and severity of students requiring support.
- A continued increase in community agency supports and services to eliminate wait lists for sufficient and timely pathways to care across the province, especially in northern, remote and rural areas.
- Investment in a coordinated system of care that includes community mental health, public health, hospitals, and cultural/faith partners that has students and families at the centre, ensuring that community mental health centres focus primarily on intensive services and are staffed sufficiently for this role.
- Ensuring a focus on mental health supports for transitional youth, especially youth transitioning to post-secondary settings, with an even greater focus in this area due to the pandemic.
- Providing additional resources for attendance counsellor support and credit recovery/rescue support, especially to reengage students and families as a result of remote learning and COVID-19 as indicated through the increase in home schooling.
- The provincial government strongly advocate to the federal government for mental health supports and services in First Nations band-operated schools, proportional to supports available in provincially funded schools.
- Marketing careers in the mental health sector.
- Pre-service teacher programs include mental health and well-being learning that is aligned with School Mental Health Ontario resources/supports being delivered in Ontario school boards.

## **Special Education**

Special Education continues to be an area that is underfunded given the prevalence and complexity of student needs. This is even more significant where community services and supports are not readily available or easily accessible and have been highlighted and exacerbated during COVID-19. These students could now potentially have even more significant learning gaps that need to be intentionally addressed.

OPSBA recommends:

- Responsive funding that reflects the ongoing specialized needs of students who require special education supports and/or services.
- Continued review of the special education grant components to ensure they are reflective of the current school board realities.
- A comprehensive review to fully understand the issue of assessment wait times, gaps in services and access to professional staff across the province in order to provide timely and relevant supports to students and their families. This is more acute in northern, rural, and remote communities.
- That special education and specifically autism supports and services continue to be reviewed and revised to meet the student and family needs, especially as it relates to the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on learning and well-being.
- Predictable and stable funding to ensure that all learning spaces, educational equipment and teaching practices are fully accessible, under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* and associated regulations under the *Act*, for all students to engage and thrive in all aspects of school.
- Continued support for the valuable contributions that our school treatment centres offer to students and their families, and for locally seconded staff.

### **Skilled Trades and Apprenticeships**

OPSBA applauds the government's recent efforts to promote the skilled trades and apprenticeships. OPSBA would like to see even more focus at the provincial and local elementary and secondary school levels to help students and parents develop positive attitudes toward the trades and be provided with more "hands on" and experiential learning opportunities. An apprenticeship focus can easily be expanded and integrated into existing vocational school programs and through secondary school experiential and cooperative education programs, as well as Specialist High Skills Majors. This will involve balancing and/or shifting funding levels for commencing an apprenticeship to secondary schools rather than only in post-secondary and employment settings.

OPSBA recommends:

- Supporting continued funding for the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and the Specialist High Skills Major programs, with a request that the government expand relevant opportunities for students to begin to earn apprenticeship hours while in secondary school and address the issue of a lack of skilled trades' education and apprenticeship options for Indigenous students in Indigenous communities.
- Providing dedicated funding for renovations in secondary school facilities and new construction to provide shop programs to support careers in the trades (Grades 7 to 12).
- Support for amendments that will change the journey person to apprentice ratio for all trades to increase student access to these career opportunities.
- A continued targeted marketing and communications plan, specifically directed at parents, students, educators and employers, to further elevate skilled trades to a respected and desirable pathway.

# Advancing Reconciliation: First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education

## **Indigenous Education**

OPSBA and its Indigenous Trustees' Council continues to advocate for enhanced and focused funding for all First Nations students in publicly funded schools, and consistent with OPSBA's identified priority of Advancing Reconciliation, believes support extends to ensuring gaps for on-reserve and off-reserve Indigenous students. As part of its core belief in ensuring equity, funding must be targeted to allow all First Nations students the opportunity to achieve a provincial standard, regardless of where they live, and whether they are included under an Education Services Agreement/Reciprocal Education Approach (ESA/REA).

The last couple of years have represented an opportunity for pivotal change with Canada's and Ontario's relationship with all First Nations People, and First Nations communities. The ongoing discovery of the graves, mostly unmarked, of children who died while in the care of Canada's Residential School System and as part of government policy, has ushered in a new era of responsibility of understanding, teaching, learning, and accepting this country's shared history.

Supporting and strengthening Indigenous Education continues to be a priority for First Nations, for OPSBA, and for governments across the country. Advancing Reconciliation in support of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a major focus of OPSBA's Indigenous Trustees' Council and is one of OPSBA's key priorities.

It must be understood that protecting and revitalizing culture, and recognizing that culture and language are inseparable, is necessary for reconciliation and history to be reclaimed.



Annualized funding with a long-term commitment to supporting the development of First Nations educational leaders will provide a growing pool of talent and mentorship for Indigenous youth. Establishing a focused pre-service education recruitment strategy for teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels; as well as a school administrator specific to First Nation micro and terminal credentials, will advance the leadership and teaching gaps that exist between First Nation communities and public district school boards, which are increasingly in receipt of First Nation students.

Additionally, continued and annualized funding for the "Indigenous Graduation Coach" along with accompanying accountability and performance metrics to ensure resources directed for First Nations students, are being spent on these intentional interventions will advance not only graduation outcomes for students, but advance reconciliation as well.

OPSBA recommends:

- The provincial government appropriately fund and demonstrate its commitment to accurately representing Canada’s legacy of Residential Schools, by developing a mandatory “Residential Schools” Curriculum for all students to be required to be taught, as part of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). Included in such funding would be supports for teaching staff, curriculum support and professional development that allows for a provincially mandated credit bearing course, and also the ability for collaboration at the local level between First Nations and school boards to embed locally developed content, reflecting local history.
- Ensure that all school boards are funded for and required to offer the NAC10 (Expressions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Culture), and NAC20 (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada) for students in order to ensure an accurate historical account of Canada’s legacy of the Indian School Residential School System, and its intergenerational impacts.
- Improved funding for dedicated Indigenous language instruction, taught by accredited Indigenous language speakers.
- Programming and staffing, such as graduation coaches, should be enhanced, particularly at the secondary level to support Indigenous languages, and land-based teaching.
- Investing and expanding broadband access for Indigenous students.
- Supporting the promotion and development of Indigenous people into teaching positions and teachers into leadership positions – such as school principals and vice-principals, supervisory officers, and directors of education – to advance reconciliation.



## Supporting Trustees as Leaders in Public Education

### **Trustee Professional Development**

OPSBA believes that local democratically elected trustees make a significant and direct contribution to the achievement of all students through their leadership in directing the policies and priorities of their local school boards that shape a culture of continuous improvement.

In a publicly funded education system, trustees are the decision-makers that know their communities best. They are the crucial link between the school board and the local community members that voted for them.

With a new term beginning, the trustee role is an important amplifier for community voice that helps inform education policy at both the local and provincial level. OPSBA continues to promote and support the role and voice of the local, democratically elected trustee.

OPSBA recommends:

- The Ministry of Education provide funding to the Ontario Education Services Corporation to further develop resources and opportunities for trustee professional development. These would be collectively determined by the school board/trustee associations and the Ministry of Education.



- The Ministry of Education co-develop with school board/trustee associations orientation sessions and/or materials for recently elected trustees.
- A coordinated communications strategy be implemented that informs all stakeholders about the role and responsibilities of school boards and trustees.
- Support for consistent trustee governance orientation and professional development.



## Advocating for Sustainable and Equitable Education Funding

### **Northern and Rural Challenges**

OPSBA's northern, rural, and remote school boards continue to identify the unique needs and challenges their communities face, which include difficulty attracting and retaining employees, a scarcity of specialized professionals and services, relatively few community employers, and overall geography.

Student transportation continues to be a major issue when considering the availability and shortage of qualified drivers, length of routes, extreme temperatures, and the costs of ground and air transportation for Indigenous students from remote northern communities who attend public schools in urban communities.

Northern students frequently also face challenges with regard to Internet access due to insufficient broadband capability and/or costly internet services.

Flexible funding that each individual board can use to address local issues must be considered. Every effort must be made to address these issues to maximize student engagement, improve achievement, promote and support student mental health and well-being, and improve graduation rates and preparation for future endeavours.

OPSBA recommends:

- Consulting with northern boards and authorities when determining funding packages.
- Allowing increased flexibility in the teaching qualifications for specialized staff in northern regions.
- Committing to an ongoing dialogue between northern government decision-makers and education leaders.

### **Student Transportation**

Student transportation is critical for many students and their families. It is more than the morning and afternoon rides to and from school. It includes school field trips, sporting events, other extracurricular activities, experiential learning such as cooperative education, and perhaps additional service for before-and-after school care. It is a complex issue that requires detailed analysis for fair and full funding, and considers local circumstances. The coordination often involves several partners; multiple school boards, different school bus operators, separate consortia, and in many instances, school boards work with their municipalities' local public transit.

Transportation issues for school boards include adequate funding, driver recruitment and retention, and safety. Many boards continue to regularly overspend their transportation budgets to meet their own unique needs. OPSBA was a member of the Ministry of Education's Student Transportation Advisory Group (STAG) and has now also been invited to a recent stakeholder consultation to review the Student Transportation funding formula. It is our request that the findings and recommendations of both the STAG and this newer review are released to the sector with the appropriate supports in time for the upcoming provincial budget and Grants for Student Needs.

In recent years, much work has been done to ensure the areas around schools are safer with the inclusion of community safety zones, increased fines for drivers that speed, as well as adding cameras, safety arms, and upgrades to exterior lighting on buses. This work needs to be part of a regular discussion at the municipal level.

OPSBA recommends:

- The Ministry of Education implement an updated framework that uses a needs-based approach and benchmarks that reflect the true costs of providing student transportation.
- The Ministry of Education consider the unique student transportation circumstances, such as the availability of municipal transit options, as well as the needs that each board (northern, rural, remote, and urban) has. This includes supporting student participation in field trips, sporting events and extracurricular activities.
- The Ministry of Education commit to the investment of increased funding to attract and retain school bus drivers.

## **Technology and Broadband**

The pandemic has reinforced the importance of in-person learning and the role schools serve as hubs for learning, critical social interaction and community connection. It has also reinforced that technology can play an important supplementary role in student learning. Investments need to continue for school boards to support the classroom experience for staff and students through access to computers and software. The ministry should also provide funding to allow school boards to provide students with quality devices and create equitable access to reliable, affordable internet bandwidth, which is needed beyond the school setting and currently lacking in many rural, remote, northern and Indigenous communities. Lack of this infrastructure across the province continues to create gaps in equitable learning opportunities for vulnerable and marginalized student populations. We are also aware of boards that are facing increased challenges associated with the costs and limitations of software licensing agreements, which were heightened during emergency remote learning.

OPSBA recommends:

- Implementing a predictable cycle of evergreen technology funding so that all students and staff have ready access to technology devices for individual use, as needed, to support learning and working.
- Ensuring corresponding funding for IT departments to meet the increased demand for technology support for staff, students and families.
- Continuing the work of the Broadband Modernization Program to ensure there is equitable and timely access to improved technology infrastructure for all school boards across the province by regularly connecting with school boards to identify areas where infrastructure gaps remain.
- Reinstating the dedicated funding for the procurement of licenses for educational software (previously coordinated by the Ontario Software Acquisition Program Advisory Committee [OSAPAC]).

- That the provincial government strongly advocate to the federal government for technology and broadband supports and services in First Nations, band-operated schools proportional to supports available in provincially funded schools.
- Prioritizing funding to support sustained professional learning opportunities (e.g., job embedded approaches or a coaching model) to support effective pedagogical design for the integration of technology in the classroom
- Sustained support of the OeLC through the Ministry Transfer Payment Agreement process to support English language school boards in the implementation of the two mandatory online credits.

## Strengthening Positive Labour Relations

### Labour Relations

OPSBA believes that teachers and education workers 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.

It is OPSBA's goal to negotiate fair and equitable collective agreements through the collective bargaining process. Our priority continues to be the improvement of student achievement and well-being.





ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

Leading Education's Advocates



## Appendix A

### *\* School Board Staff Mental Health Lead Rationale*

In 2011-12, OPSBA proposed the staged implementation of school board mental health leads to support students in all 72 school boards. In conjunction with the leadership of School Mental Health Ontario, this successful strategy has been integral to creating coordinated school board and provincial mental health action plans, development of evidence-based resources, building staff capacity over time and facilitating key community connections.

Mentally healthy students are directly linked to mentally healthy school and board staff. Given the stressors linked to supporting students during the pandemic, there is an identified need to replicate this successful model by creating a similar position that designates a School Board Staff Mental Health Lead to support staff. Although an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is a helpful staff resource, this position by comparison is designed as a proactive strategy to build capacity for healthy classrooms. Ideally, this Lead position would be a registered health professional with defined areas of competence related to adult mental health and workplace mental health.

Over the last number of years there have been many requests of the student mental health leads to support staff mental health, which is inconsistent with the original intent of the role and diverts key resources/supports away from escalating student-based mental health needs. Given the current realities related to staff mental health, it is recommended that the equivalent funding of a full-time position be implemented in all 72 school boards for each of the next three years. This staff mental health lead position would directly champion the priority of staff mental health, and work in tandem with the Student Mental Health Lead to coordinate, align and implement strategies and practices to build, maintain and sustain healthy classroom environments for students and staff. This dual-pronged approach will lead to improved, sustainable outcomes for both students and staff.

Implementing this strategy will demonstrate the incredible value that we collectively place on school and board staff. It will intentionally promote the inclusive and productive learning and teaching environments needed for all members of the school community to thrive. OPSBA would be pleased to be part of an education partner working group to further develop this strategy.