

Thank you for the opportunity to submit feedback on education funding for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year. Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board (DPCDSB) is one of the largest and most diverse school districts in Ontario with 151 schools serving 80,000 students and employing over 11,000 people throughout Mississauga, Brampton, Caledon and Dufferin County.

The Grants for Student Needs (GSN) funding model provides the majority of revenue to school boards. A significant portion of the funding is based on per pupil or per school calculations with additional special purpose grants that attempt to address the unique needs of individual school boards. The specific areas of the GSN model that the DPCDSB would like to see change enacted include the following:

1. Technology

The increased demand for technology is putting a strain on school board infrastructure. The need to equip our classrooms with technology and ensure adequate back office infrastructure, including bandwidth requirements, server needs and system growth is expanding at a rate not seen in prior years. In addition to the increased hardware and computer devices across the system, there are increased needs for support, maintenance and repair. Recently, many school boards were notified that an existing Student Information System (SIS) solution would be phased out in August 2020. The loss of vendor support has placed many school boards across the province in a precarious position, with the only option being the migration to a newer SIS platform. This puts significant pressure on the expenditure budgets of school boards. The only funding identified in the GSN is the per pupil amounts of \$45.03 for secondary students and \$34.52 for elementary students. It is also widely recognized that school boards continue to evolve when it comes to classroom technology and learning resources for students. However, with the minimum funding available to school boards, it is increasingly difficult to make technological change.

The very real and serious threats of cyber attacks, including ransomware and malware attacks, are evidence of a new area of extreme concern for school boards. Building up defences against cyber attacks involve costly investments in systems to ward off any exploitation of weaknesses in computer systems and network systems.

School boards are thankful to the Ministry for the Technology Learning Funds (TLF) funding that had been afforded to boards, as well as the most recent broadband solution funding, however these are one-time infusions of funds that leave the school boards accountable for significant ongoing maintenance, support and upgrade costs. Boards do not have the base funds to replace these devices when they stop working. A one-time injection of funds is not helpful if the equipment is lost at the end of its life-cycle. Continued funding must address the ongoing maintenance and support costs that school boards face annually.

2. Absenteeism

At the forefront of the recent collective bargaining discussions between the unions, the CTA and the Crown, is the cost of absenteeism to school boards. The health and well-being of all faculty and staff is

of paramount importance to us and it is fully understood that access to sick leave is necessary. However, the preeminent issue is a significant increase in absenteeism board-wide coupled to a lesser extent with the ability to secure supply teachers to cover teacher absenteeism.

Legislation in 2012 fundamentally altered provincial sick leave plans and greatly increased access to paid sick leave, without any changes to the funding model. The model for sick leave has created an increased expense for all school boards.

Over the past five years, the board-wide average teacher absenteeism rate at DPCDSB has increased from 8.5 days to approximately 14 days per academic year. DPCDSB employs over 5,800 teachers. In addition, the *Earned Leave Plan* was centrally negotiated with the province. Based on a formula, it provides permanent teachers access to paid days off in recognition of attendance that is below the board-wide average. Earned leave plans were intended to realize savings for school boards and province, but this never transpired. The entire program has been an administrative burden with an end result of increased absences.

A review of the funding provided for supply coverage is requested to align with the current absenteeism rates that boards are experiencing. In addition, the GSN model does not currently provide funding for supply coverage of other employee groups. These costs have to be absorbed within existing categories or just not provided by boards, to the detriment of students, staff and school communities.

3. Benefits Funding

The DPCDSB fully supports the provincial benefit plan model, Employee Life Health Trusts (ELHT)s, in place for all employee groups. At the time of the transition, it was recognized that the current funding mechanism for the trusts would need to transition to a funding method through the GSN over the long term. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) had been established, yet there has been no solution proposed for the GSN funding model.

A significant concern to the DPCDSB and some other school boards across the province is the 12-year phase-out period for the elimination of retirement gratuities. The benefit benchmarks in the GSN are reduced by 0.167% each year for the 12-year period that began in 2012. DPCDSB had successfully negotiated to end retirement gratuities in 1979 by providing a fully funded LTD Benefit plan for all employee groups. At the time, all negotiations were local only. This left DPCDSB with employer paid LTD plans and no provincial funding to support the cost as the benefit benchmark funding continues to be reduced. Funding the LTD plan at DPCDSB exceeds \$11 million annually.

With the ELHTs in place, there should be a mandate from the Ministry to continue transitioning all benefits, including LTD, to the trusts. The funding model no longer supports differentiated benefit options across school boards and therefore, change is required to align benefits similar to the process the Ministry followed in phasing out retirement gratuities.

4. Funding for Transportation

The transportation funding formula requires a review. As referenced in the *2019-2020 Technical Paper*, the Ministry has acknowledged that the transportation funding formula needs a review in order to achieve a more efficient and accountable student transportation system in Ontario.

For the past several years, school boards have been rated for transportation efficiency based on an Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) Review model that connected funding to performance. A Consortia with low ratings would not receive funding adjustments and any transportation deficit that existed had to be reduced through improved operational practices. One of the requirements to achieve a high rating from the E&E review requires the consortia to operate as a single legal entity. Where a consortia operates efficiently and effectively without incorporating, it should not be penalized for that decision and appropriate funding should be provided.

The renewal of bus operator contracts in the last few years has resulted in significant contract cost increases for transportation consortia across the province. Student transportation costs also increase as a result of capital priority decisions made by the Ministry of Education which can force boards to transport students to schools with underutilized space rather than building schools closer to new growth areas. The existing moratorium on school closures has a similar impact on student transportation.

5. Renewal Costs and Capital Planning

The Ministry provides funding for renewal and repairs to school buildings, as having learning spaces in a good state of repair is essential for supporting student achievement and well-being. The funding is expected to help school boards repair roofs, update HVAC units and modernize electrical and plumbing systems. It can also significantly improve more visible elements of schools that impact students' learning and well-being, including flooring, walls, ceilings, playing fields and more. However, renewal needs continue to exceed the available funding each year.

There is no mechanism within the GSN model to fund the repairs and maintenance needs of administrative buildings. Similar to school buildings, the administrative buildings are aging and require essential repairs to ensure safe working environments for all staff members. When the Greenhouse Gas Reduction (GHG) Funding was available, school boards were able to invest in energy efficiencies to achieve ongoing savings. The elimination of that funding has stopped many energy efficiency programs. Flexibility to allow some limited amount of renewal funding to address the needs of administrative buildings would be beneficial to school boards.

The Capital Priorities Program (CPP) exists to support school boards with urgent accommodation needs. The existing cost and space benchmarks of the Ministry, that are much lower than current construction and design costs, makes it extremely difficult for school boards to get plan approvals and then to launch the capital build project, often keeping them in a loop of application, denial and repeat.

The moratorium on Pupil Accommodation Reviews (PAR) has prolonged the burden on school boards to carry operating costs associated with empty pupil spaces.

6. Special Education

The Special Education Per Pupil Amount (SEPPA) represents the largest component of the special education grant, however, the close dependence on enrolment creates a volatile funding environment for school boards. Service and supports to our most needy children can be interrupted due to enrolment declines. Statistics have shown that special needs incidence rates in students are increasing, yet the funding model does not proportionately meet the growing expenditure needs of boards to address the increase in identified exceptionalities.

The envelope reporting doesn't include board expenditures in the non-instructional categories of expense. Many expenditures are supporting special education from these areas. The support of in-school Administration, accessibility planning costs, data and tech support and special needs transportation are areas covered by other dollars. We're seeing significant cost increases in these areas.

Some consistency with regard to the expenditures included in the Special Education envelope across boards may be beneficial to all. The service delivery models, while unique to boards, often show varied use of para-professionals and professional staff.

7. Board Administration and Governance

There are significantly increased demands placed on Board Administration staff with regards to accountability and reporting, however funding for administrative tasks is often overlooked. Examples include implementation of negotiated collective agreement terms that often require system upgrades, implementation of *Ontario Regulation 274* on Hiring Practices, introduction of Priorities and Partnerships Fund (PPF) initiatives and the recent benefits transition to ELHTs.

Boards are experiencing increased stress and medical leaves among administrative staff, for which there is no mechanism within the grant to support short term replacement staff.

The Ministry of Education Uniform Chart of Accounts requires all legal expenses to be mapped to Board Administration and Governance despite no identifiable source of funding within the grant model. As a large urban school board within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), there are significant legal issues, with outcomes that can be precedent setting on a provincial basis. Human rights and special education legal concerns are increasing exponentially.

The Board Administration and Governance grant is also lagging in terms of keeping up with average salaries for these highly skilled workforce positions. Average salaries for certified professionals in finance, human resources, employee relations, planning and communications exceed the benchmark funding determined by the Ministry. Many boards have been operating in underfunded positions as a result of the new model being introduced. Without the flexibility of use of other miscellaneous revenues, most school boards would be non-compliant positions.

The GSN funding model incorporates benchmark increases for inflation and cost of living in other grants, such as school operations. Building a cost of living increase into the Board Administration and

Governance grant would assist with the inflationary pressures coming through technology and software costs, legal and audit services and salaries.

Summary

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Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board