

**Ministry of Education**

**2016-17 EDUCATION FUNDING:  
DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

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## INTRODUCTION

This report reflects the ongoing commitment of the Ministry of Education to work with the education community to improve the funding mechanisms that support education in Ontario. It provides an overview of extensive discussions that the ministry recently undertook with its partners and stakeholders.

This annual joint effort has helped achieve significant progress in improving the value and impact of funding in a number of areas. Program funding in the education sector will need to continue to be managed very carefully as the Province is committed to balancing its budget by 2017-18.

Discussions on policy underlying financial decisions have been guided by the following principles, set out by the ministry:

- Alignment with the goals in [Achieving Excellence](#), the renewed vision for education in Ontario;
- Support for an equitable system that takes into consideration such factors as location, language, denomination and socioeconomic status;
- Consistency with the collective bargaining process; and
- Alignment of funding decisions with changes to school board cost structures.
- Stakeholders put forward these additional principles:
  - School boards should recognize their stewardship role in managing public resources; and
  - The entire public sector needs to plan in an integrated way so that communities make the most efficient use of public assets possible.

The discussions leading up to the 2016-17 school year looked at core areas of funding. In addition, the ministry turned a special focus on grants intended to help close gaps for specific groups of students:

- Special Education Grant
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement
- Language Grants

- Students at Risk (Learning Opportunities Grant and Safe and Accepting Schools Supplement)

Collectively, these grants are referred to in the [Guide to the Grants for Student Needs 2016-17](#) as funding for specific education priorities.

Discussions took place at several locations across the province and involved:

- School board representatives, including Directors of Education and senior school board officials;
- School board trustee associations;
- Principal and vice-principal associations;
- Teachers' federations;
- Education worker unions;
- The Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education;
- The Minister's Advisory Council on First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education, Chiefs of Ontario's First Nation Education Coordination Unit, Ontario Public School Board Association's First Nations Trustee Council;
- Parent groups (People for Education, Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations, Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, Parents partenaires en éducation, Canadian Parents for French); and
- Student groups (Ontario Student Trustees Association, Minister's Student Advisory Council, Regroupement des élèves conseillères et conseillers francophones de l'Ontario, Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne).

The discussions represent a further step in a process that started in 2013 to revitalize the annual consultations around funding. As participants have found, while these annual discussions focus on key policy issues, they also provide an opportunity for broader conversations.

## **EFFICIENCIES AND REINVESTMENTS**

A focus of discussion was identifying both efficiencies and opportunities to reinvest savings.

### **Efficiencies**

Participants made several suggestions directed mainly at the ministry:

- It should work with regions to find efficiencies tailored to local needs and opportunities, especially in remote areas.
- It should expand its efforts to provide a better multi-year picture of provincial finances, communicate clear expectations and share best practices and lessons learned.
- It could help boards plan to improve energy efficiency in both new and existing schools, possibly partner with other ministries to leverage opportunities like co-generation, and, in some regions, assist with a switch to natural gas heating.
- Negotiating more costs at the provincial level might achieve savings, although some noted that greater savings are sometimes available locally or regionally.
- Several boards mentioned the value of provincial licensing of e-textbooks and other digital resources.
- Encouraging more videoconferencing and online training to reduce travel costs and the time educators have to be off site.
- Curriculum-related savings might be found by enabling more on-line delivery of secondary school courses and making course schedules more flexible.
- Consistent province-wide application of rules, for example around program offerings, would help manage parents' expectations and boards' costs.
- Consortia for purchasing services and commodities, including energy, might help cut costs. Boards noted, however, that policies need to be flexible because a regional or individual purchase might achieve the lowest cost, depending on circumstances.

Participants also suggested ways that boards could work together to find savings, while noting that willingness to cooperate varies across the system:

- Boards could develop a central data bank of specialty consultants, including lawyers, for shared use. These could be listed by area of expertise and location.

- Where several boards all have the same need, whether a space for staff development or a tradesperson for maintenance, they should pool their resources.
- Boards should commit more strongly to delivering summer programs in coterminous space.

Transportation was identified as an increasing pressure. Boards noted that costs have risen steeply. As well, funding does not recognize the costs related to special education needs, First Nations tuition agreements, language programs, or added needs when a school closes. Issues around transportation costs are further muddied by inconsistencies from one board to another. While there have been efforts to create transportation consortia, not all boards felt these have helped reduce costs, and some stated concerns about equity.

Some boards suggested that the scope of the Technical Advisory Committee be expanded to include transportation as well as information technology, another increasing pressure.

Boards and other participants had questions about some ministry activities and the value they add. Some noted a need for better integration of grants. Analyzing overlaps in funding targeted to students with specific needs could help to streamline grants, coordinate services and break down silos.

Broader integration was seen as especially important as the school system is increasingly seen as the place to go for such services as support for mental health. They felt the community hub model could help create much-needed integration with other ministries and partners to meet this need.

## **Reinvestments**

Participants identified several areas where they felt reinvestment of savings would create value and improve student achievement:

- Doing more preventive maintenance and better asset management, and improving the condition of school buildings generally;
- Improving technology, especially for students with special education needs, providing robust information technology/internet infrastructure in the north and creating shared service hubs;
- Scaling up existing cooperative efforts to reduce back office costs;

- Providing funding for managing staff absences and for planning for board succession and other transitions;
- Moving to an electronic process for many records that are now paper-based; and
- Developing better performance indicators beyond EQAO results.

Some boards noted, however, that it is hard to generalize about where any savings should be reinvested, given the unique needs of each school board.



## **CONTINUING TO MAKE MORE EFFICIENT USE OF SCHOOL SPACE**

Many boards agreed that the School Board Efficiencies and Modernization (SBEM) measures have been fair, although school closures remain challenging. There was wide agreement that the new investments have made implementation easier. It was also suggested that to help overcome local resistance, the ministry should be more prescriptive in its policies.

The view was expressed that the changes put pressure on some boards more than others. Some northern boards felt that the measures did not fully reflect their local challenges. As well, those representing staff were concerned about the impacts of school closures and consolidations. They suggested boards be allowed to reinvest some of the savings to ease the transitions, and sought assurance as to the ultimate end point the initiative was supporting.

A particular concern among smaller, more remote boards was that when a school of theirs closes, students often change to another board to avoid a long bus ride. This loss can start a vicious circle where it becomes increasingly difficult for the board to serve its population, a particular concern for French-language and Catholic boards.

Boards raised the possibility of increasing operating budgets to help them through the transition and to cover increased transportation costs and lower-than-expected savings in areas such as staffing. Some suggested that the phase-in should be extended.

Over all, there was a sense that looking at child and student development holistically would be helpful in deciding what constitutes an efficient school.

Noting that the title of the initiative refers to both efficiency and modernization, some wondered whether the focus on modernization was strong enough. This might embrace everything from wireless and broadband needs to innovative building design ideas to whether an individual school could house the entire age continuum from early years to high school graduation.

Adding new complexity to that discussion was the notion of creating community hubs and partnerships. Participants viewed this as requiring a long-term planning discussion involving many partners: not just provincial ministries, but the federal and local municipal governments, and First Nations, Métis and Inuit, and other key community organizations.

Participants were concerned about the possibility of confusion arising from bringing forward measures to encourage efficient use of school space that might result in school closures while at the same time promoting community hubs. They felt the ministry needs to provide clearer guidance and messaging, and explain to boards and the broader public how the two policy directions relate to each other.

## **School consolidations**

The ministry has updated the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline and created a Community Planning Partnership Guideline to clarify and streamline the process for a proposed school closure. Most participants responded positively to the changes, seeing them as making the process simpler, fairer and more efficient.

It was noted that many boards had made tough decisions about closures, while others – especially larger urban boards – were still delaying. Boards in large urban centres, however, argued that they need to maintain “core holdings” of schools because they would not be able to get back into the real estate market once a property was sold. The counter-argument was that boards serving remote, disadvantaged areas with older schools were being forced into closures that are much harder on already-struggling communities.

Many remote boards argued that keeping a school open is sometimes the only option. Closure may mean a one- or even two-hour bus ride, and they suggested formulas need to take into account not just distance but road quality and what options – if any – students have if they miss the bus.

A major concern around closures and consolidations was lack of alignment with ministry capital approvals. Boards pointed out that a key argument to parents for consolidating schools is poor condition of one or both buildings. It is hard, once parents accept this, to learn that the consolidation cannot proceed because no additional capital money is forthcoming. The board is left with parents upset about building conditions. Better coordination of board decisions and ministry funding would underline ministry support for consolidations.

Several boards were also concerned that because the guidelines for new school buildings do not address use by other partners, closing an older school has in some cases prevented existing educational partners from moving to the new building.

There was generally positive reception of the School Consolidation Experience studies that the ministry commissioned, but some participants said they would like to see more on lessons learned, pitfalls and challenges, and on the impacts on staff other than teachers and administrators. There was also interest in case studies of a wider range of consolidation types.

## **Ontario Regulation 444/98**

Ontario Regulation 444/98 sets out the process and conditions for sale of a closed school property. Boards must offer any property first to a “preferred entity” such as another board or the local municipality. After 90 days if no preferred entity is interested in the property, it can be offered for public sale.

Boards felt there should be greater clarity as to what the preferred entities are and how they rank. It was also suggested expanding the list, to include First Nations and Métis communities and groups, who are often local educational partners. First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants strongly agreed.

Boards expressed a general preference for the current 90-day circulation period (or even a shorter one) instead of a longer one, because a board will typically grant its own extension if a preferred entity expresses interest.

Many boards noted that they have difficulty selling schools, and having to keep them in salable condition while closed involves extra costs, especially if they cannot find a tenant. Many boards asked that the ministry work with potential buyers to reduce the waiting time.

In more active markets, boards were very concerned about the selling price because the proceeds help pay for repairs and renewals to other school buildings. They suggested a mechanism to bridge the gap between an offer placed by a preferred entity and the fair market value of a building, if the latter is higher. Some boards said they would like to be able to expand the use of sale proceeds to pay for enhancements to new builds or retrofits.

A concern of boards in growth areas was that they use portable classrooms for flexibility, but funding does not recognize their higher heating and cooling costs.

## **Facility condition**

Some boards pointed out that funding appears to reward boards that have not invested properly in maintaining their facilities, while penalizing those that have. They felt that an accountability mechanism that intersected with facility condition information would be useful.

Boards also argued that they need more flexibility in using their capital funds. They felt that changes to rules have made it harder to undertake small maintenance upgrades. Grouping them for renewal funding creates considerable work and approvals take a long time.

Some boards expressed support for tying a facility's utilization rate to condition information, while other boards had little interest in this. In particular, remote and rural schools are often in poor condition and underutilized, but must stay open because there are no reasonable alternatives. These schools would lose funding. On the other hand, boards noted that underutilized schools can sometimes attract more students by upgrading or renovating the space.

## Community hubs

There was widespread agreement that community hubs are a good – even great – concept that can be valuable for students and the school system as a whole. They could bring together important strands of the larger learning context, including child care, student well-being and the Special Needs Strategy. Hubs could reinforce parents' belief that a school is a community asset that should support their child's progress through the entire year.

Participants noted several obstacles, however:

- There is no clear or legal definition of “community hub”.
- Where a school is underused, a hub will not necessarily save it. The student population might still be too low for effective learning, or – especially in a remote area – there may not be enough partners.
- Partners do not understand that boards cannot afford to provide space free or at rates below their costs.
- Creating hubs/partnerships takes a long time. Once up and running, hubs can come to dominate the day-to-day responsibilities of administrators and, especially, principals.
- Providing space for other parties can be costly and complicated. There are numerous facility-related issues, including liability, health and safety, access control, parking and maintenance.
- While community hubs could provide service in French as part of an overall vision for the francophone community, there are not enough qualified French-speaking people in every part of the province to offer the required services.

Participants offered several suggestions for ensuring hubs that support learning and do not penalize boards financially:

- The province needs to communicate more clearly the purpose and direction of hubs, stressing that not every empty space can be a hub, and to move more decisively to foster hubs before more schools that could house them are closed. Guidelines for each step of the process are needed, especially to support the creation of appropriate partnerships.
- All levels of government should coordinate their efforts to provide integrated services through hubs. Some boards found dealing with municipalities especially time-consuming.

- Educators and other school staff must be included in the broader discussion needed to define a hub and create a model.
- Community hubs need to be about meaningful partnerships to address the goals of Achieving Excellence, including student well-being and achievement. Boards should have the final say and should plan the schooling content before opening to partners.
- School boards must be compensated for the extra costs, and the burden of managing the building should not fall on principals. There should be a pricing structure for hub buildings, and funding for new buildings should address use by partners. Where partners are funded by other ministries or levels of government, those funders should cover the costs.
- Pre-approval of capital funding for new hub projects would underline the ministry's commitment and support.
- Partners need assurance that any capital investments they make in a hub will be part of a stable, long-term arrangement, with proper compensation if the building is sold at a future date.

Many participants stressed that to build parent support for partnerships and hubs, student safety needs to be paramount.

## EXPANDED ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES

### Education Programs – Other

Educational Programs – Other, referred to as EPOs, is funding provided outside the GSN. EPOs are generally provided for programs with specific goals that might be of limited duration. Because of EPOs' different funding arrangements and goals, they come with their own accountability and reporting mechanisms. In 2014-15, the ministry initiated the EPO Transformation Project to simplify the reporting processes and requirements. Some changes have been made, and work continues on the transformation.

School boards generally felt that the mechanisms for EPOs, especially for small dollar amounts, were onerous. They suggested that:

- A clear, succinct master transfer payment agreement for the funds would be welcome.
- EPOs that have been in place for several years (like library staffing, Parent and Community Engagement Partnerships) should be moved into the GSN.
- Remaining EPO grants should be bundled by purpose, based on the aims of Achieving Excellence and/or the board's own strategic plan, and boards should have flexibility to use them to align with local needs.

Other participants proposed keeping many of the existing accountability requirements.

Both in-year timing of EPOs and longer-term planning were concerns for boards. They suggested that:

- There should be one announcement of all EPOs as early as possible in the year and a single reporting deadline of August 31 to eliminate multiple planning/reporting cycles.
- Where possible, the ministry should indicate whether an EPO is likely to be multi-year to help manage human resource needs.

On reporting, boards' suggested:

- The curriculum team and board administration need to connect to better understand EPO grants. Accounting/reporting should come from board finance to ensure accuracy.

Boards said they would also welcome ministry reporting on whether EPOs are achieving the desired outcomes, and best practices in using EPO grants based on other boards' achievements.

## **School Board Resource Sustainability Index**

Participants were asked for their views on the value of a School Board Resource Sustainability Index (SBRSI) based on a common set of indicators. These might include measures of financial, capital and human resources that are not now reported. The ministry asked for suggestions on appropriate measures and how they might be used.

Some participants identified the need to encourage new strategies to better align board and ministry priorities, and felt the index might be helpful. Concerns were noted, however:

- Boards were worried that the index might add to an already heavy burden of reporting and accountability frameworks, and felt the index should come with a commitment to reduce the administrative workload.
- Many felt that the purpose was not clear – was it to build public confidence, help boards perform better, attract enrolment, or some combination of these aims?
- Boards urged that academic indicators be incorporated to inform the index with a larger strategic vision for students.
- Boards questioned how the information, especially financial indicators, could be made relevant and easily understood. Plain language and a one-page summary were suggested.
- Some felt that trying to meet benchmarks might stifle innovation.

Suggestions for possible metrics and/or indices included:

- Create a value-for-money index, not just financial measures.
- On human resources, report on staff surveys on wellness, psychological health and safety, and/or to existing third-party workplace reports in these areas. Tie this to boards' succession planning and absence management tools.
- The well-being of students, especially in specific education priority groups and funding for these groups. Some of this discussion might be narrative instead of metrics.

- The 10 factors of student success, suspension rates, credit accumulation, EQAO results and questionnaires.
- Green architecture and other green initiatives. Other building-related metrics might include utilization rates and community use.
- Use government or other data to describe the economic health of the local community/region.
- Track students' higher education and career outcomes.

Some boards suggested that they should be able to select individual measures from the index to create a customized report.

There was considerable discussion about how the index should be used and shared. The range of viewpoints included:

- Share results among boards, especially on a peer-group basis; produce a provincial public report on trends, strengths, weaknesses and actions to address weaknesses.
- Report to communities in lieu of some reporting to the ministry. Frame it from the perspective of the taxpayer, not in terms of what boards are doing incorrectly.
- Educate parents about existing research and activities to provide context.
- Use an independent third party to ensure better efficiency/compliance.
- Develop centralized reports on some key measures to save ministry and boards from mining data.

To develop the index, a focus group that includes school boards was suggested, as was a modelling exercise to test the concept and share it within the educational community before considering public release.



## **EQUITY IN EDUCATION**

A central goal of *Achieving Excellence* is equity in education. The following grants support this goal:

- I. Special Education Grant
- II. First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement
- III. Language Grants
- IV. Students at Risk (Learning Opportunities Grant and Safe and Accepting Schools Supplement)

Together, these grants comprise support for specific education priorities.

### **Other measures of need**

To be effective and efficient, funding needs to be allocated on the basis of need and formulas should use current, accurate information. Because of concerns about the reliability and accuracy of data from the 2011 National Household Survey, which replaced the mandatory long-form census last collected in 2006, participants were asked to suggest alternatives. (In the course of the sessions, the federal government announced it would reinstate the long-form census; despite this, new data is not likely to be available until 2018, and in any event the ministry is interested in valid alternatives or supplements to the census.)

Most of the suggestions related to individual grants, and so are set out in the sections that follow. Participants noted, however, that certain risk factors and/or social determinates of health, like the use of social programs and food banks, incidence of teenage pregnancy, childhood obesity and food insecurity, might be useful in general.

Participants stressed that in contemplating any change, the ministry needed to be mindful of the need for continuity and time for boards to adjust their long-term plans.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION GRANT**

This grant provides additional funding to boards for students with special education needs. It helps support the incremental costs of programs, services and/or equipment those students require. The six allocations within the Special Education Grant are described in the 2016-17 Education Funding: A Guide to the Special Education Grant, which is available on the ministry's [website](#).

In addition to the Pupil Foundation Grant and other Grants for Student Needs funding, the ministry allocates funding for students with special education needs through the Special Education Grant. School boards have the ability to use other allocations of the Grants for Student Needs to support students with special education needs.

Special Education Grant funding is “enveloped.” Boards may use the Special Education Grant only for special education, and must defer any unspent funding to use for special education in a future school year.

### **General discussion**

Many participants noted increasing pressure on special education supports. Roughly one in six students in Ontario now receive special education programs and services.

It was noted that more children appear to be entering kindergarten with special education needs, which are often very complex. Boards were concerned about the ability to support these students and their families. As the number of students with very high needs goes up, it was noted that fewer resources are available to help those with relatively minor needs. As well, safety of school staff and other students is an increasing concern.

Boards suggested increased teacher training and professional development in particular, because students with very complex needs can affect the learning environment for the whole class. Other participants noted that educational assistants, who often interact closely with these students, would also benefit from professional development.

Mental health issues were a special concern. It was noted that there is a fine line between education and treatment, and this is becoming increasingly blurred within the school system. A related point is that social services are voluntary whereas education is compulsory, so the school may have to provide services by default.

The feeling was that the Ministry of Education needed to work with other relevant ministries to ensure provincial funding is spent effectively and efficiently.

Another area that boards grappled with was a model of inclusion/integration for students with special education needs (seen as more desirable, but requiring more space,

training and supports) versus separation. Different boards take different approaches, but the funding model does not reflect this reality.

It was noted that this issue is part of a bigger conversation that the ministry and its partners need to engage in about what works best for students with special education needs.

Adding to boards' concerns, they reported an increase in legal challenges that have resulted in higher staff and legal costs. Some of the capital costs related to special education space needs that are not funded were noted earlier. Other costs include installing ramps, repainting to avoid trigger colours, and providing similar building accommodations.

On accountability, one participant said that educational assistants funded through the special education envelope spend considerable time supervising the general student population, instead of working with students with special education needs.

### **The incremental nature of funding**

Most board officials said they understood that the funding was incremental, but that it was a difficult message. References to “topping up” special education funding or being “over budget” create a perception that funds were coming from money that should have gone to other students.

Some, however, felt that identifying the grant as “incremental” created a silo mentality, and that a more integrated model for all learners is better. A few noted that the discussion was not relevant to parents whose focus was on the services provided to their children, not how they were funded.

Numerous participants asked for a guide similar to The Guide to the Grants for Student Needs that would explain special education funding.

### **Achieving greater effectiveness and efficiency**

Participants had several suggestions for improving the impact of existing funding:

- Integrate and connect service providers/agencies, the school/teacher and parents to share information about the student. Support this by developing a list of local resources.
- Make pooled services available by region.

- Especially in more remote areas, supplement face-to-face meetings with on-line video training for parents.
- Provide on-line training for teachers.
- Develop and provide on-line therapy for students in remote areas with specific needs, for example speech or language issues.

Some suggestions related more to policy issues:

- Because students with autism spectrum disorder have difficulty with transitions, it was suggested that boards and the ministry explore ways of allowing them stay in their classes over the summer.
- Many students with mental health problems want to attend secondary school full-time, but sometimes need to take time off. If they exceed a 15-day limit on absence in their individual classes, they have to drop courses which means going part-time or not at all. Allowing these students to “take a pause” without losing their full-time status would be helpful.
- The Special Education per Pupil Amount allocation is based on enrolment of all students. Many boards felt that this might not be the best approach, because special education needs are generally growing faster than total enrolment.

## **High Needs Amount**

The “High Needs Amount” is moving to a model that attempts to recognize the differences among school boards in their population of students with special education needs and school boards’ ability to support these needs. This is done through calculations that predict the likelihood of a student of a board having special education needs, information about these students, and other factors that impact the board’s ability to respond to those needs. Given this change, most participants who expressed a view agreed with the ministry that the name “High Needs Amount” should change to be more in line with the model and its purpose. On the issue of the change in the allocation method, many smaller boards said they appreciated greater reliance on reliable, provincially consistent data.

There was also a tension noted between measures in the formula that help boards with below-average performance and measures that recognize the boards that provide more support to students at the time of testing.

## Measures of need for the High Needs amount

Participants' suggestions on data that might improve the allocation of this funding included:

- A school's utilization factor and the extra administrative needs.
- Data on families living in poverty and on property values (although some felt the latter might be skewed).
- The Trillium system, which contains live data from school boards.
- Information on greater concentrations of need outside major centres, where housing for group homes is less expensive and/or there are pockets of rural poverty.
- Health and safety reports on violent incidents involving students with special education needs, if these could be prepared on a consistent basis across boards.
- Reports on students on alternative curricula, with the caveats that these would need to be defined consistently and that remote boards may not have enough students to support an alternative curriculum.
- Number of tuition agreements with First Nations.
- Health data on parameters that correlate with higher special education needs, for example suicide incidents, low birth weights and mother's age. Northern boards, however, urged caution in using diagnoses where there is low or no access to diagnostic resources.
- Board's ability to access other community resources that might support students with special education needs.
- Information on the population served by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services and/or Children's Aid.

Participants also felt that the statistical prediction component, which uses data from the 2006 census, needed to be updated. In addition, the data comes from postal codes, which those in rural areas felt can be skewed because of low population. They noted that in those areas, funding based on the distance from major cities and between a board's schools becomes more important

## **Special Equipment Amount**

Boards said it would be useful to have more detailed information and research on what is the best equipment to purchase and its longevity. In addition, some identified some significant reporting requirements on the technology component of this allocation.

## **Special Incidence Portion**

Because this funding is claims-based, there was some concern about variation between boards in their ability to prepare and submit claims. Some wondered whether a formula could be developed. Others recommended against this, since funding is supposed to be based on actual costs. Because the claims process is time-consuming, it was suggested that a three-year cycle could replace the existing annual one.

## **Facilities Amount**

This funding covers the costs of education programs for school-age students provided by school boards in settings outside their own classrooms, under agreement with an outside facility, institution or agency.

Boards suggested the funding could be used more efficiently and effectively through collaboration with coterminous boards and/or social service agencies. They would also like more flexibility to try new approaches. They also noted that they are being asked to cover costs, for example transportation, that existing funding does not cover.

While the processes associated with the funding are complex, boards were split on whether the agency or facility should receive the funding directly or boards should retain control.

## **FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT**

The First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement was introduced in 2007-08 to support Aboriginal learning programs. The ministry also supports First Nations, Métis and Inuit student achievement and well-being through EPOs.

Under the [Education Act](#), a school board may enter into a tuition agreement with the government of Canada or a First Nation for students who normally live on a reserve. The ministry is not a party to tuition agreements, and a board's tuition agreement students are not counted in its average daily enrolment for funding purposes.

### **General discussion**

First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants expressed an overarching concern, which is a hope to see the findings and recommendations of the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission reflected in Ontario's schools. (The commission examined the legacy on First Nations students, families and communities of the abuses that took place in residential schools.) Participants in the funding discussions hoped that the impacts would include both curriculum and broader changes.

### **Other measures of need**

Two major sources of data on the number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in a board are the federal census and students' own self-identification.

While self-identification continues to increase, census data provides higher numbers of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students in most areas. Several boards, however, said that First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities in their regions do not take part in the census, so self-identification would be more accurate as a basis for funding. It is also updated annually.

Conversely, other boards identified low rates of self-identification as a problem. They said that not all students want to self-identify because, for example, they are wary of how data is used and whether it carries over from one level of education to the next.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants echoed that wariness, and expressed concerns about how self-identification, if not kept strictly confidential, might lead to labelling and/or bullying. They suggested that boards need to revisit their processes and build awareness so that families have a better understanding of the value of self-identification. Some felt First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders should be driving the process with school boards and reaching out to their own people. Other suggestions were that First Nations, Métis and Inuit community organizations might be a better source of information than either the census or self-identification.

## **Accountability**

Many boards supported enveloping the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Supplement to ensure its use for the support of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learning programs. Some boards, in fact, reported that they already envelope internally and in some regions routinely exceed their envelope.

Numerous participants saw accountability as being broader than simply enveloping. They felt it should also include accountability to First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. While this accountability should exist for all education funding that supports aboriginal students, First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants felt it was especially important for services provided through tuition agreements. Without this accountability, it would be difficult to close the gaps that their students face.

Many participants were interested in ensuring funding was used in line with clearly defined expectations, such as student achievement and broader cultural awareness, with outcomes tracked and reported. This approach, they felt, could and should drive greater collaboration.

As to interaction between First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations and boards, many boards commented that the ministry needs to recognize the time needed to build trust. Among First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants, some boards were felt to be more open and responsive than others to their input and involvement, and more transparent about how funding was spent.

## **Achieving greater effectiveness and efficiency**

First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants had strong views as to how funding could be used more effectively. Among other proposals, some suggested that First Nations, Métis and Inuit history and culture could be more fully integrated into the curriculum generally, not limited to Native studies and language courses. As enrolment in language courses grows and more non-Aboriginal students enrol, one participant suggested, they could be funded like other language courses and supplement funding used for other support. (It was noted, however, that no Inuit language courses are currently offered.) First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants were also interested in being involved in the development of programs and training of teachers.

Participants were asked whether funding should be provided for a dedicated position for First Nations, Métis and Inuit programming and services. While several boards and First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants agreed, and some boards have already created such positions, others expressed general concern about the concept of enveloping in that it reduces budget and operational flexibility. It was noted that having a person responsible for First Nations, Métis and Inuit programming and services at a board



could be an important source of accountability in explaining how board resources (including provincial funding and tuition fees) were allocated

Staffing needs in general were a challenge. Boards reported difficulties in finding qualified staff to whom First Nations, Métis and Inuit students can relate. As well, First Nations, Métis and Inuit support workers are crucial in creating the right culture for student engagement.

Boards reported finding it difficult to forecast demand for programs, in part because more non-Aboriginal students are interested. As in other areas, participants felt that a longer-term (for example, three-year) policy and funding framework would help boards in their planning.

### **Tuition agreements**

Several participants expressed the view that it is crucial for the ministry and federal government to update the federal funding model for First Nations tuition. Issues include different year-ends for tuition agreements and provincial grants; differing tuition amounts in similar agreements, which causes distrust; a negotiation process that is seen as top-down; and lack of funding for summer courses, transportation, and other needs.

For their part, boards expressed concerns about negotiating different agreements with multiple First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. First Nations, Métis and Inuit participants felt fees were not transparent despite the board's efforts to explain them. Boards would like a unified approach to make funding more understandable and agreements easier to create.

The funding arrangements for tuition agreement students with special education needs are complex and, in the view of many boards, do not generate the required funding. This is in part because students under tuition agreements are not included in enrolment, which drives some special education funding.

Sharing data between boards and First Nations, Métis and Inuit to better understand student needs and gaps is important both to build relationships and improve outcomes. In particular, in such areas as attendance, sharing information is crucial to building strategies that ensure First Nations, Métis and Inuit students are engaged.

One suggestion was that tuition agreements should allow for sharing data. One board has a memorandum of understanding in tuition agreements around both data sharing and accountability. Its First Nations partner, as its agent, has access to Trillium data through a privacy agreement.

Another suggestion was that the ministry should standardize the platform for sharing data, as was done for e-learning, while taking into account concerns about third-party access.

Participants felt that any changes to tuition fees or arrangements need to be fully discussed with First Nations, Métis and Inuit partners and phased in if there are financial impacts.

## **LANGUAGE GRANTS**

The Language Grant is made up of five allocations, two for English-language boards and three for French-language boards. Boards from both language groups stressed the need to review allocations regularly to ensure their value in achieving the goals intended.

### **Other measures of need**

Participants wondered why so much of the language allocations were based on proxies (such as census data) as opposed to actual need. They suggested that self-identification should be part of determining funding for the language allocations. Other ways of determining need might include early-years assessments and other information that boards already have, although smaller boards may not have the resources to collect as much data.

Some boards noted problems in collecting data on country of birth, which helps determine English as a Second Language/English Literacy Development (ESL/ELD) funding, and wondered if the ministry could help with training school staff.

As in other areas, participants said that any changes in the funding formulas needed to be clear, easy to understand and communicated well in advance.

### **French-language school boards**

French language boards had concerns about being able to provide sufficient service to their community, especially within a reasonable distance, given their smaller number of schools.

It was suggested that French rights-holders not be allowed to register for French immersion but instead redirected to a French-language school. Some suggested that the French-language education system should run any immersion schools that teach in French for more than 150 minutes a day.

They also noted a lack of funding for French language boards for the equivalent of French as a Second Language. Their students start learning English in Grade 4; at that point, they said, some students do not know any English and require additional help.

The boards noted that fewer French-speaking teachers or staff are available in parts of the province and it is expensive to recruit them from elsewhere.

## **English-language school boards**

### **Support for English language learners**

Many boards reported spending more than allocated for English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development, which fund students, whether born within or outside Canada, who need help becoming proficient in English.

In some areas, boards said, an increasing share of English-language learners are Canadian-born, not recent immigrants. This is the case in parts of Toronto, for the children of immigrants; in the London area, for students from Mennonite communities; and in the north, for First Nations students. They noted that these groups do not qualify for the same funding under the Recent Immigrant Component of the ESL/ELD allocation. At least one board noted that it appeared as hard for Canadian-born English-language learners to achieve proficiency in English than foreign-born students.

There was a sense that the current four years of funding are not enough time for every student to gain proficiency in English.

### **French as a second language**

There is a growing consensus among boards that parents see their children as having a right to become bilingual and some regard it as a way out of poverty. With this increased interest, they looked to the ministry to work with boards and other stakeholders on a vision for French language learning.

On a day-to-day level, they noted that the increased interest is making it difficult to find qualified teachers and the other staff needed when French immersion starts in earlier years. Boards noted that core French programming for grades 1-3 is not funded, even though it is being provided to meet demand. The cost and availability of French-language materials and digital resources were also concerns.

In some areas, boards said they were not offering French immersion because they couldn't keep up with the demand for core French. Another concern was the ability of French-language boards to allow registration by committee, which made it hard for their French immersion programs to compete.

Boards are also seeing higher transportation costs related to French-language. Not all boards agreed that providing transportation, as well as the program itself, is an equity issue.

At the secondary level, some boards were reporting problems offering French immersion programming because of low enrolment, and wondered if e-learning might be an alternative.

## **Accountability**

Boards appreciated the flexibility in the allocation for using funding for students who might not otherwise generate it under the formula. Some boards also liked having the opportunity to use a portion of funding for a designated person to be a champion for language initiatives, including French as a second language.

There was no support for more enveloping or increased reporting. Boards maintained that local flexibility is important to keep programming in certain schools. They felt enveloping reinforced a “silo approach” to individual students’ needs, while schools had to address such needs holistically.

On the balance between support for students born outside Canada versus those born here, boards did not want to create competition for funds between the two groups.

## **STUDENTS AT RISK**

The Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) and the Safe and Accepting Schools Supplement support students at risk.

### **Other measures of need**

LOG includes several components, each based on a number of measures, including demographic data. These are outlined in detail in the Guide to the Grants for Student Needs 2016-17.

Participants were open to the idea of revisiting the demographic component of LOG through a technical advisory group. As with other potential changes to formulas, however, they warned that boards need time to adjust. As well, formulas should not create perverse incentives that punish schools whose students do better than expected.

Participants suggested additional types of data that might help identify need:

- Tax-filer data;
- Local health and mental health information, for example on birth rates, teenage pregnancies, drug use, addiction, student and/or parent mental health, and access to urgent care;
- Children's Aid Society referrals, United Way information and data used by police to determine where more resources are needed;
- Social risk indicators from the Early Development Instrument;
- The social index compiled by the polling firm Environics;
- Data from the High Needs Amount prediction model;
- Availability of external service providers;
- Unemployment and employment volatility; and
- Housing prices.

Some of these measures are already being used by larger urban boards for internal allocation purposes.

On the use of tax-filer and other income-related data, participants were split as to whether poverty necessarily linked to low achievement. There were also concerns that

tax-filer reporting among households in the target group might be lower than in the population as a whole.

In the north, boards felt higher incomes might not mean lower risk, as many households had high incomes linked to resource-based jobs despite low education. Parental education might be more appropriate, if it correlated to risk. (A concern of northern boards was that this historic pattern led to an undervaluing of education.)

The existing funding formula for students at risk has a 25 per cent weighting for recent immigrants. There were concerns that those students, while they may need language resources, are actually highly motivated to perform well. Conversely, northern boards have less immigration but many First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, who don't factor into the calculation even though they are often high-risk.

Another high-need group that participants said is not picked up is students not living with their families. The school typically gets the student access to clothing, food, mental health help and supports so they can continue their education. This involves staff time and resources that aren't funded, but tracking the number of students might be difficult.

## **Accountability**

Boards reported general satisfaction with the bundling of several items in the LOG, because it supported a balance between helping targeted groups and keeping some flexibility.

Some participants pointed out that it's important to focus first on the issue the ministry is trying to address with funding for students at risk, because each board has different priorities. One participant suggested looking at boards that have low/no funding for students at risk to see how they address priorities. Given fiscal constraints, the ministry may need to re-examine priorities and the school system may need to consider whether it should continue trying to do everything it's currently doing.

While some students at risk often struggle with other issues, including special education needs, not all do, so participants recognized a need to keep the two types of funding separate.

Some participants said that accountability should lie at the local governance level, suggesting that high-risk boards need more flexibility, not less.

A specific concern was the component of funding for students at risk for urban high-risk schools. Boards wondered if it was going to be permanent, as this would have an impact on staffing.

## **CONCLUSION**

As in previous conversations, the ministry valued the expertise, good will and spirit of innovation that participants demonstrated, especially in discussing equity priorities as the special focus for 2016-17.

As the education sector works to reach important goals for student achievement, the contributions of all partners around the discussion tables served as a reminder of the trust and teamwork needed to ensure Ontario continues to benefit from an outstanding education system.



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