

Ministry of Education

2017-18

EDUCATION FUNDING: DISCUSSION SUMMARY

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Introduction

The Ministry of Education each year engages with a wide range of parties that have an interest in Ontario's publicly funded education system. This document reports on the engagement process for the 2017-18 school year.

As in previous years, the discussions looked at core areas of funding, which are collectively known as the Grants for Student Needs (GSN), and at funding through Education Programs – Other (EPO). For 2017-18, areas of special focus were:

- *Achieving Excellence*;
- Broadening the equity in education conversation; and
- Enhancing public confidence.

The discussions were structured around specific questions covering a range of relevant topics with the aims of prompting discussion of recent changes in funding mechanisms and looking for direction as future changes are considered. As in previous years, participants were encouraged to raise any other issues of concern to them.

Discussions brought together the following groups:

- School board representatives, including Directors of Education and senior school board officials;
- School board trustees' associations;
- Principal and vice-principal associations;
- Teachers' federations;
- Education workers' unions;
- The Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education;
- The Minister's Advisory Council on First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education;
- 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 conseillers et conseillers francophones de l'Ontario, Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne).

A summary of the discussions follows. Questions under each topic heading have been summarized and/or condensed. The full questions and technical background are available in the engagement guide, which was provided to all participants before and during the engagement sessions.

Renewed Mathematics Strategy

This new strategy aims to improve student achievement in mathematics.

The questions covered:

- Whether the strategy needs clarification or additional support;
- The opportunities and challenges in educating teachers this year;
- How boards might best use the flexibility built into the funding, accountability requirements, and possible other supports to help improve math achievement; and
- Whether the Renewed Mathematics Strategy funding could be allocated more effectively and/or efficiently.

Clarification or additional support

Generally, participants felt that since the strategy was launched only in the 2016-17 school year, it is still too early to answer many of these questions in detail. They did, however, make the following points:

- While the strategy is of value, it may reduce time available to teach other subjects and should not come at the expense of other key elements of education, like teaching basic literacy and instilling skills in critical thinking and understanding;
- It is hard for boards to change focus so quickly when the groundwork to go in a different direction was already in place;
- The strategy lacks a clear pedagogical component to guide how best to teach it, does not adequately address the needs of students with special education needs or those with learning disabilities, and is supported by resources that are sometimes outdated;
- Some wondered why existing programs were ended to introduce the new strategy, and what effort had been made to capture lessons learned;
- The ministry should consider revising the math curriculum, especially for the early years, incorporating math more broadly into other courses, providing more opportunities for students to practise their skills, and having math specialist teachers in the earlier grades, not just high school;
- Students need to understand the purpose of math outside the classroom, for example through a link to the Specialist High School Major initiative;
- For Indigenous students, land-based learning (which is being used in some Cree communities) might be valuable in teaching math;
- The strategy should leverage the practices of boards with good results in math and achievements of First Nations Student Success programs (note: FNSSP is a federally funded program in First Nation operated schools), and should co-fund successful approaches that boards have piloted; and
- There should be a range of well-designed indicators in place to measure the success of the new strategy.

Educating teachers (and others)

On the question of building capacity - for existing teachers in teaching mathematics, many commented on the challenges, especially at the elementary level, where concerns were expressed about the readiness to teach math, particularly in larger blocks of time, after completing pre-service teacher programs. The importance of not only having math content knowledge, but also solid pedagogical approaches in math was also emphasized.

In addition:

- Many participants expressed a concern about using professional activity (PA) days for training because there are already a significant number of PA days.
- Because many supports are available only in central locations, for northern and remote boards travel costs comprise a larger portion of their overall budget;
- There was doubt as to whether training would help teachers who do not already have a math background;
- It is hard to train teachers whose math expertise varies widely, especially with the limited opportunities available; and
- It would be good for teachers to be trained over the summer, if possible.

It was agreed that where principals have become closely involved in implementing the strategy, whether by taking courses, mentoring teachers or encouraging collaborative professionalism, there has been greater success. It was suggested that training more principals might be beneficial. There was some concern, however, around putting yet another burden on principals.

Using funding flexibility and developing other supports; accountability

Boards outlined the approaches they have taken to improve math performance, including the use of numeracy consultants and coaches, teacher teams, one-on-one help for students, and the development of new teaching models. One board reported that they survey math lead teachers to assess needs and tailor professional learning accordingly.

Some boards expressed a preference for greater flexibility in the use of the funds, suggesting less monitoring and paperwork for boards with better results. Reporting requirements were thought to be onerous.

On accountability, one board commented that secondary accountability requirements are more valuable because they are more precise than the elementary requirements.

More effective and/or efficient allocation of funding

A number of participants had concerns and raised questions about allocating funding in part on the basis of school and student results on Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) province-wide testing:

- There were questions about the completeness of EQAO data, and time lag between results and funding;
- If this is a long-term strategy, using short-term EQAO data may not be the best driver;
- It is not clear how the new strategy and testing performance are supposed to be linked;
- Targeting funding to low performers penalizes schools that have already put effort into improving scores and risks attaching a “label” to underperformers;
- Both French language and Catholic boards felt that because their math results are generally better, the strategy penalized them unfairly;
- Because scores province-wide generally are better in Grade 3 and Grade 9, but dip in Grade 6, more investigation and evidence are needed to understand why this is happening;
- Some felt that boards and principals, not the ministry, should decide which schools to support, because they have better on-the-ground knowledge, but others believed that the ministry was better positioned because it has more data;
- The funding should take into account the highly varied circumstances of boards across the province and their individual strengths and weaknesses; and
- The ministry should be looking at gaps in test performance on a question-by-question basis and sharing this information with boards to help support math improvement.

Other thoughts were:

- Include a technology component in the funding;
- Provide additional funding for summer programming to help students struggling with math;
- Redirect funding at the elementary level to provide for more teachers in large schools that have a math specialist and have worked effectively with students to bridge gaps; and
- Fund secondary schools by grouping them with their elementary pathway schools to support students moving from Grade 8 into Grade 9.

Other issues

Some participants spoke to the role of the home environment and culture in math achievement:

- Several participants felt that parents themselves often have “math anxiety” and are unable to help their children with math homework, so the ministry should expand existing help to parents (for example, on-line modules for grade 7 to 10 math support), and should translate support material into Indigenous and other languages; and
- Thought should be put into how to change the culture generally so that students are excited by math, as is the case, for example, in Finland (where the emphasis is on real-world application and thinking problems through rather than memorization).

Participants asked that the ministry, including its curriculum development staff, continue this conversation with all interested parties, including students, so that a clear and effective long-term strategy can be crafted and shared.

Highly-Skilled Workforce

Ontario is implementing an integrated strategy to help build a workforce adapted to the demands of a technology-driven knowledge economy. The strategy is set out in *Building the Workforce of Tomorrow: A Shared Responsibility*, the report of a Premier's expert panel which was established in fall 2015.

Questions focused mainly on these areas and covered, in general terms:

- How to work towards a target of 25% student participation in Specialist High Skills Major programs by 2019-20;
- How best to provide more opportunities for students to learn through real-world experience, and meet the goal of every student having at least one experiential learning opportunity by the end of secondary school;
- How to use continuing education and other funding to give adult learners more access to flexible options, such as hybrid learning, and how to support accountability for their success.

General comments

Many participants expressed the view that the strategy was a step in the right direction, and that Specialist High Skills Majors might even start in Grade 9 or 10 instead of the current Grade 11 or 12, and that students would enjoy real-world learning.

For maximum impact, many felt that the strategy should be tied to other programming, such as employment services, literacy and English language supports, and better integrated with postsecondary options, including apprenticeships. A few noted, however, what they felt to be a lack of research to support the strategy, for example on labour market needs, and others wondered how robust the long-term evidence was for the strong emphasis on experiential learning.

Some spoke to the need to instill an entrepreneurial spirit in students through better connecting the private sector and school boards. More generally, improving the economy, especially in smaller communities and those with cyclical industries, would call for greater collaboration among municipalities, counties, the education sector and employers. Suggestions included setting up industry advisory panels and providing financial incentives for local businesses and other partners.

There were also concerns about the up-front costs of building or leasing facilities and purchasing equipment to train students for skilled trades, especially as rapidly changing

technology can quickly render it outdated. Some felt that partnerships with colleges and/or universities, including combining campuses, might help to resolve this and other concerns.

On family attitudes, boards and students felt that parents in some areas were resistant to the idea of their children pursuing a trade instead of university. In other parts of the province, however, it was considered hard to prepare students for postsecondary education or even life-long learning because parents wrongly assumed that good local jobs were available to those with just a high school education.

25% target for Specialist High Skills Major

Many participants were concerned that it would be hard to achieve the 25% target for the Specialist High Skills Major by 2019-20. There was also a perceived conflict between this program and co-op programs, and also with French immersion programming.

There were concerns around:

- Not having the right teaching resources or enough resources, and not having a succession plan in place when a teacher who champions the program leaves;
- The impact on credit accumulation and the ability to complete religious courses at Catholic schools;
- The administrative time needed to set up a program and market it to students;
- The cost of transportation to deliver students to programming, especially in remote areas;
- The decreased funding when students in these programs ended up, as is often the case, taking more than 34 credits;
- The loss in quality as a school increased its offerings; and
- The marketing among schools and co-terminous boards over the programs and the risk of students switching schools to have more options.

In line with the last two points, it was felt by some that the funding formula worked better for large schools than small ones (although there are examples of schools sharing programs).

As well, there were questions about how well the Specialist High Skill Major was serving what was felt to be its current target group, at-risk students, and whether this focus might be lost as the program expanded.

Providing more opportunities to learn through experience

On experiential learning, community-based opportunities like visiting researchers and chances to see skilled tradespeople at work were felt to be beneficial, even as early as in grades 7 and 8. To improve effectiveness, there was an interest in having the ministry compile and share information on how boards are using funding, and also in tying curriculum more closely to experiential learning.

Smaller and more remote boards cautioned, however, that it was already hard to find enough suitable opportunities with employers. Funding for a board-level coordinator was suggested as a way of building capacity, as was more exposure/training for teachers.

Other barriers included a minimum age requirement of 18 years on the job site in some industries, as well as health and safety or other requirements that prevented workers from coming into classrooms. French boards were concerned about finding suitable opportunities where students could work in their own language.

One board suggested offering summer co-op programs as Continuing Education courses, permitting co-op credits to be counted as compulsory credits for the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, and allowing either volunteer hours or a community-connected experience to be counted.

Indigenous participants pointed out that First Nations, Métis and Inuit students who go on to postsecondary education often pursue studies of benefit to their communities, and the strategy should recognize and support that. Community organizations are already working in that direction and sharing the funding with them might be highly effective. It was also noted that experiential learning can be cultural, for example working with elders to build a sweat lodge, as well as land-based. Participants noted several instances of experiential learning developed in collaboration with First Nation communities or institutes.

Giving adults more access

General suggestions were for more professional development on how adults learn best, and looking at emerging delivery models and learning technologies to enable hybrid learning.

A number of participants noted that many adult learners were former students who had left school just a few years earlier. Even though they might need only a few credits, family and other demands mean they often struggle to complete the required hours. One board suggested paid co-op opportunities to help reengage these learners.

Adult programs are often housed in older buildings, participants said, and neither teachers nor students feel as well supported as those in regular classrooms. Better guidance and assessment is needed to identify and achieve goals. Some on-line learning is available, but there are issues with broadband bandwidth and collective agreement restrictions. These factors may all contribute to what some saw as a decline in interest among adults in finishing high school. It was also mentioned that a change in how alternative education models are funded has reduced funding for adult education.

One board noted that to set up an adult education program it had to submit the proposal to three separate ministries; suggesting that streamlining the process would be helpful.

Performance measures

One board suggested that funding should reflect such measures as credit accumulation, graduation and attrition rates, attendance, and analysis of the student's courses and pathways.

Enabling digital education

To meet the goals of *Achieving Excellence*, the Province's renewed vision for publicly funded education in Ontario; access to a robust and reliable broadband internet connection is a necessity. Boards have various revenue sources available to support digital education, including funding through the GSN for learning materials, classroom computers and associated network costs, and EPO funding, such as the \$150 million being invested in the Technology and Learning Fund over three years.

Participants were asked to consider the following:

- The system's learning needs around technology-enabled learning;
- How to use broadband to support student achievement, ensure equity, promote well-being and enhance public confidence;
- If the Technology and Learning Fund were continued, how it could be used more effectively and/or efficiently;
- Possible collaborative governance (for example, consortia) of digital education assets; and
- Possible reasons for year-to-year volatility in computer operating and capital spending.

Needs around technology-enabled learning

A general concern was that understanding of digital learning (and teaching) is still evolving, especially in relation to the needs of the future workforce. Participants identified several learning needs:

- Better training for teachers, as students are often more advanced where technology is concerned, and give them opportunities to share successes and challenges;
- Possibly provide Additional Qualifications for teachers who need to stay current in technology;
- Teach students that using technology for learning is different from social use;
- Give students more exposure to and understanding of coding and programming;
- Explore the intersection between digital and experiential learning;
- Develop innovative approaches to group-based digital learning, including digital forums involving teachers and students; and
- Recognize that when information is easily available, the challenge becomes understanding and applying it properly.

One board noted that EQAO does not test or report on technology or related skills, like collaboration.

One group suggested that the Minister of Education should set up a taskforce to review the issues in digital education and related infrastructure needs.

Use of broadband to support goals

Broadband is a key enabler of digital learning, but access remains costly or impossible in remote areas, especially the North and parts of Eastern Ontario.

It was suggested that the ministry should:

- Track performance across boards to determine the problem areas, and develop a province-wide plan for information technology in the education sector to ensure consistency and equity; and
- Include other public sector partners in the area, such as universities and colleges, municipalities, hospitals and municipal government, and redirect some funding to support this collective approach.

Indigenous participants noted that access was important because their students may prefer on-line learning. Digital learning could also support smaller groups taking Indigenous language or Indigenous studies courses. For First Nations participants, getting better access was critical for expanding the use of an e-learning platform that learners have embraced in their own schools.

Participants noted several ways in which digital connections can make more effective use of what otherwise might be “down time” – for example, students can work from home when weather or illness keeps them at home. Another thought was installing Wi-Fi on school buses to allow students to make use of travel time, especially if they have long rides.

In areas where students faced challenges attending school because of distance, one board noted, e-learning could enhance home schooling. To allow this in elementary grades, however, the ministry would need to broaden access to the e-learning register, which is now limited to secondary-level students.

Where bandwidth is available to a board, concerns focus on the age of schools, which can hamper installation, lack of equipment and devices, security, and issues of effectiveness and equity. Many participants felt that continuing concerns in all these areas were slowing the shift to a fully realized digital classroom.

A conundrum for boards is which investments to make, especially as technology changes rapidly and devices proliferate, and who (teachers, educational assistants, administrative staff) should get which equipment (desktops, laptops, notebooks). One board wondered whether schools should be trying to keep up with consumer-based technology, much of which quickly becomes obsolete. Another concern was the choice of platforms.

Other concerns included:

- Lack of sufficient funding for broadband access, technology maintenance, licences, upgrades and equipment replacement, for retrofitting older buildings to allow broadband installation and for systems for human resources, payroll and other administrative functions;
- Being required to provide and/or allow for numerous devices when the infrastructure cannot support the bandwidth need;
- The trade-off between standardization, which reduces support costs, and getting the newest technology to the teachers who need it the most;
- The need for more individuals supporting schools who understand both technology and teaching;
- Investing more and developing protocols in such areas as security, privacy and confidentiality, record retention, and service backup and data recovery in case of disruption;
- The differing comfort/access levels among students and the inequities that “bring your own device” approaches can highlight; and
- Maintaining the optimal balance among several factors, including learning digitally versus through other modes and interacting socially on-line instead of in person.

Technology and Learning Fund

While the Technology and Learning Fund is appreciated, participants noted that because it is an EPO, it does not offer predictability for planning and should be moved into the GSN. It was also felt to be lacking in clear direction, while at the same time being a major paperwork burden.

For the GSN-based portion of the funding, many felt that it needed to be updated to reflect new technology and higher student expectations.

Boards spoke to ways in which they allocate funding, including setting access standards and making resources available to teachers who have shown their commitment by getting training. There was also a suggestion that an element of digital learning funding should be designed to reward teachers’ creativity in using technology to improve instruction.

Collaborative governance

On collective governance to achieve economies of scale, interest varied widely. Some pointed to the examples of other consortia (such as transportation) that have not always yielded the expected benefits. Concerns included the lack of incentive for large boards to join, the risk the ministry might create a new organization, which would take time, and the difficulty of bringing together differing existing platforms and meeting differing requirements driven by collective agreements. Others expressed interest, nonetheless, in using collective governance to tie digital learning resources to the curriculum, centralizing “back-office” and other administrative functions, and possibly developing a central help desk.

There were suggestions as to how ministry involvement might provide economies of scale through:

- Using the Province's central servers to save board information;
- Negotiating bulk purchases of devices; and
- Negotiating central agreements with internet service providers.

Spending volatility

Participants linked volatility in spending to:

- Combining as much purchasing of equipment in a single year to save money;
- Equipment replacement and warranty policies and the decreasing shelf life of hardware; and
- Cutting the technology budget when other pressures have to be accommodated.

Special Education Grant

This grant provides additional funding, beyond the foundation grants, to help ensure equity in access to learning for all students. Beginning in 2016-17, the name of the High Needs Amount has been changed to the Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount to better express the allocation's purpose.

Participants were asked about several considerations, which can be broadly summarized as:

- Accountability measures beyond EQAO assessments for the ministry to assess outcomes for students with special education needs;
- Boards' internal processes to ensure funding is used in the best possible way, and what other GSN allocations boards use to complement the Special Education Grant and whether/how this could be reported;
- Possible changes to the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and how to maximize their impact and better enable educators to support students directly;
- How to improve the use of the Special Incidence Portion for students with greater special education needs and better define and report on these students.

Accountability measures beyond EQAO

Participants agreed that, especially for students with special education needs, assessment should look at the whole individual and over-all well-being, not just at EQAO data.

Some wondered whether students with special education needs should be required to take the EQAO assessment at all, expressing a view that boards should not be penalized for exempting students from assessments. A number of individuals commented on the need to allow students with special education needs to access their usual classroom supports (for example, speech to text tools) during assessments. Indigenous participants felt that their students faced particular challenges in the EQAO assessments.

Many saw difficulty, however, in measuring other dimensions of achievement:

- There was resistance to another province-wide measure like EQAO testing, but also concerns about the ability of smaller boards to develop their own measures;
- Ministry policies restrict other evaluations; and
- Dropping EQAO without an adequate replacement would take away any ability to benchmark.

One board commented that there should be a change in the outcomes of a student with special education needs within two years, and a standard way of measuring this is needed. One indicator, for example, could be the degree of modification needed for a student to take part in a standard program.

Measures suggested (and used) by another board included report card, suspension and other individual performance data, attendance and student/parent voice.

There were general thoughts around the outcomes being sought through special education programs and funding, such as whether students are expected to graduate or gain other academic achievements, or whether the intent is instilling life skills.

Ensuring funding is used in the best possible way, and other sources of funding

Lack of consistency across boards in their approaches to special education and, consequently, in how funding is used was felt to make it challenging to measure efficiency or effectiveness.

Some noted, however, that a board known to have a strong approach to special education may face the likelihood of additional students with special education needs moving to that board, which would increase the pressure on the board's resources.

There was consensus that boards typically struggle to find the resources to meet the needs of students with special education needs, whose numbers appear to be increasing despite lack of growth in total enrolment. As well, student and parent expectations are rising, including an interest in experiential learning as an aspect of special education and a desire for one-to-one student-to-staff interaction.

The early years present an important opportunity, as that tends to be the period when the greatest improvement is possible: yet some felt the needed supports, for example early childhood education staff and early interventions were lacking.

One board noted the growth in the number of educational assistants and expressed concern about whether they are being deployed effectively.

Some boards felt that enveloping of funds made it challenging to supplement special education funding from other sources.

Participants outside school boards expressed an interest in greater transparency in reporting how special education and other funding are used for these students. Some boards, however, noted that reporting requirements are already onerous, and several recommended wrapping the current allocations into one.

Individual Education Plans (IEP)

Some said the IEP was a cumbersome document and staff "write notes on top of it" to improve its value, with some individuals noting there should be a greater focus on delivery of program instead of record keeping. One board suggested updating the guide and providing more sample IEPs. It was also suggested the deadline for IEP preparation be extended to 45 days to allow for deeper assessment, also that students should have an active role in preparing the IEP regardless of their age, and that a mental health component should be added.

The IEP was also raised in the context of measuring progress, in the sense that a board/school should be accountable for the outcomes it identifies. There was a view among some that teachers resist developing an IEP for a student when the resources needed to implement the IEP are not available.

Special Incidence Portion funding

Many participants noted that the base amount of Special Incidence Portion funding (\$27,000 for each student identified as needing care from two or more full-time staff) has remained the same for more than a decade and does not cover the actual costs that boards face. One board said their actual costs were four times the amount provided.

Moreover, it was mentioned that health and safety issues, including educational assistants sustaining injuries and/or stress-related illness, are overshadowing efforts at education for these students. Safety plans are becoming more common and more complex. At the same time, some participants reported conflicting processes and guidelines from the ministry on how to work with high-need students.

Because so many resources go to support the highest needs students, there was a concern that the needs of “second-tier” students with special education needs cannot be adequately met.

Other comments

Inclusiveness was recognized as bringing more equity but greater costs and challenges in the classroom, especially with increasing severity and complexity of needs. The ministry heard that schools are increasingly seen as a place of last resort because of gaps in health system and community services: as one participant commented, it is becoming hard to draw the line between school and hospital.

One board suggested frequency, intensity and duration of behaviour and/or physical/medical needs should be used to determine which students have the greatest needs, and thought a standardized alternative curriculum for these students would be helpful. More generally, a recurring theme was lack of a clear definition of special needs (particularly the relationship between a student with special education needs and one with an IEP).

On the allocation of funding, many felt that the current methodology is opaque and has created inequities among boards. Some suggested that a greater share of funding should be allocated through the Differentiated Special Education Needs Amount and less through the per-pupil amount. In a similar vein, a more needs-based model was also suggested (although with cautions about the problems of the previous model).

There was concern, however, about making any change too quickly, as boards need time to adjust their approaches.

Other suggestions included:

- Better training for those working with students with special education needs;
- Embedding a special education component into all aspects of professional development;
- Better connecting mental health/well-being and special education funding, including funding mental health nurses directly, not through another ministry;
- Requiring boards to link Indigenous Education Councils with Special Education Councils, to more effectively tackle the needs of Indigenous students with special education needs, and using more community resources to help these students;
- Providing more funding for specialized transportation needs and the extra space outside classrooms that students with special education needs often need, and for speech therapy;
- Limiting the reduction in Special Education funding received by a board;
- Creating a Special Education working group to review the adequacy of funding;
- Adding a French-language funding component because of the difficulty of hiring French-speaking specialists;
- Relying less on postal code data; and
- Better recognizing the difficulty remote boards have in accessing special education experts.

First Nations participants were concerned about the rising costs of special education for their students because it increases the funding they must provide through education service agreements. They wondered whether the socioeconomic status of First Nations communities was reflected in the funding formula. As well, terminology around special education differs between school boards and First Nations, which can create problems in education service agreements.

Another area that many cited for attention was gifted students, who often appear to struggle with anxiety and depression despite their academic abilities, but who are sometimes overlooked.

Indigenous Education

Several changes were made to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit education supplement, which supports Indigenous learning and courses in Indigenous languages and Indigenous studies, after discussions in fall 2015. These included funding for a First Nation, Métis, and Inuit lead position in each board; using 2011 National Household Survey data to update the per-pupil amount calculation; and moving support for board action plans from EPO to the GSN. In addition, as part of its response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, Ontario made a three-year annual investment (2016-17 to 2018-19) of \$5M. In collaboration with First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners this investment will support targeted resource development and educator capacity building to enhance (age and grade appropriate) learning and teaching of the history and legacy of residential schools, treaties, and the Indian Act (1876).

Participants were asked about:

- Boards' progress on putting in place dedicated leads;
- How well the current four allocations address the needs of Indigenous learners;
- The balance of accountability with respect to the components of the Supplement;
- The possible increased use of self-identification data in funding models;
- Their satisfaction with provisions of the Calculation of Fees for Pupils regulation;
- Examples of successful Education Service Agreement negotiation approaches, and opportunities for improvement.

General comments

Participants had several general comments:

- Many noted frustration among First Nations students, their families and often their communities as students struggle with the legacy of intergenerational trauma, especially in the sphere of education, and other challenges;
- There was a suggestion that the ministry and boards should bring together the Truth and Reconciliation Curriculum Steering Committee, and the Minister's Advisory Committee and Working Group to engage on policies;
- They also stressed the need to address Indigenous students' challenges with a concerted effort involving the Ministry of Education, other ministries, and Indigenous partners;
- Indigenous partners noted that the ministry and boards need to recognize they are not homogenous, and each group (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) has distinct histories and profile in Ontario:
 - First Nation partners noted that though the Political Accord signed in August 2015 with the Province as an important document that recognized the authority of treaty holders, it was not yet reflected in engagement;
 - Métis partners spoke about the history of denial of their existence in the province; and
 - Inuit partners said that while their communities are seen as purely Arctic-based, increasing numbers are moving to Ontario for education and other services and support is needed for this transition
- Indigenous partners expressed frustration that their input on funding was sought only once a year in the engagement process and that outcomes in the budget were often different from what they had discussed and expected;
- Generally, they noted a lack of consistency in the strength and value of their relationships with school boards across the province; and
- They also pointed out that they have significant resource material that isn't being used because board staff does not know about it. They suggested training for school staff in order that they are able to direct Indigenous students and families to appropriate resources.

Dedicated Indigenous Education Board Leads

Many participants commented on the dedicated lead position:

- Indigenous partners had concerns that the position did not reflect their input, did not represent evidence-based open and transparent decision-making and moved support into board offices and out of classrooms in some cases;
- They also wondered why the effectiveness of existing board leads had not been assessed before extending the initiative across all boards, and also why the funding failed to cover a consistent performance evaluation tool;
- Both board and Indigenous representatives said they found the announcement as well as the implementation confusing:
 - Indigenous partners said that some boards required candidates to have supervisory qualifications, even though this was not a ministry requirement and eliminated most Indigenous candidates;
 - Boards were not sure if they were required to hire Indigenous candidates and if so, which qualifications would be required; and
 - Boards that had already created such a lead position were uncertain as to how they were expected to respond to the new initiative and what it meant for funding.
- Boards responsible for large geographic areas said funding for multiple part-time positions across the area would have been better, to save on time lost to travel;
- Other boards were concerned about fairness issues because the new position was supposed to have a single portfolio, while most supervisors are responsible for several; and
- A few boards noted that they did not have enough Indigenous students to warrant a full-time board lead, and that often they could not find a suitable candidate in any event (this was especially the case for French catholic boards).

Despite these concerns, many participants saw potential benefits. One table heard about the work being done by a lead at a northern board, which included helping negotiate education services agreements, building capacity, running community events, and bringing the community into classrooms.

To fully leverage the benefits, however, Indigenous representatives said that they needed to know more about who the leads are, what they were doing and how to engage with them.

They also wondered what the role of leads was in curriculum development, whether the funding and positions would be long-term, and how they would ensure appropriate input into Indigenous education. On the last point, they stressed the need for a consistent, formal process for engaging with Indigenous organizations and communities to identify contacts and where to seek advice and get feedback in developing the board action plans as well as implementing policies.

Self-identification

Indigenous partners were generally wary about voluntary, confidential Indigenous student self-identification, citing widespread distrust of how the information is gathered and used, especially where parents had experience with residential schools.

As a result, many felt that this method underrepresented the Indigenous population and wondered if a model could be developed to better estimate numbers. Comparison to new data from the 2016 census was also suggested.

If use of self-identification is to be continued, suggestions included:

- Ensuring data is not used to automatically stream Indigenous students into applied courses whether it is appropriate or not;
- Ensuring methods for collecting data are simple to understand and ensure confidentiality; and
- Building greater trust with Indigenous families and communities (some noted that when a school felt culturally safe, for example because boards go to communities or a teacher has self-identified, data collection improves).

Many within and outside Indigenous communities wondered about the goal of self-identification, which they felt had not been adequately explained.

Accountability

For Indigenous partners, accountability clearly extends beyond how boards are required to report spending to the ministry. They stressed the need for a wider definition that included accountability to their students and communities, because at present, boards vary widely in their commitment to Indigenous education.

They noted that only 60 of 72 boards currently have Indigenous education advisory committees/councils, and how these operate within boards is unknown to them.

Similarly, they noted that while Board Action Plans (BAPs) are potentially beneficial, accountability to Indigenous communities must be embedded in the documents. This should involve engagement with Indigenous organizations in the documents' development of the BAP and better reporting back on how funding was used, including a breakdown by group (First Nation, Metis, Inuit) instead of "Indigenous."

One suggestion was for the ministry to compile a summary of board action plans, including breakdown by type of activity (language, leadership, and so on), to share with Indigenous partners and other stakeholders.

On financial accountability, Indigenous partners felt that funding should be fully enveloped to prevent boards using it to cover shortfalls in other areas.

They also noted that the First Nation Metis and Inuit per-pupil amount is not accounted for in reporting back, which puts board leads in a difficult position because they cannot explain to Indigenous communities how the money is being spent.

Curriculum and Indigenous Languages/Studies programming

Many participants noted the tension inherent in providing funding for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education that includes both support for Indigenous students and for courses that any student can take.

Participants generally felt that while educating as many students as possible about Indigenous history and culture was critical, this should be done mainly by embedding material in the general curriculum. They suggested that Indigenous Studies courses be funded from the GSN as other courses are, not through the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit supplement.

Indigenous participants stressed the importance of sensitivity training, protocols and connection to Indigenous communities and organizations to ensure the right historical context is in place as material is taught. They advised that teachers reference Truth and Reconciliation documents and resources.

With Indigenous Studies funded through the GSN, they felt that more resources should be directed to teaching and revitalizing Indigenous languages. Being able to access learning in their own language is a component for an Indigenous student's wellbeing.

There are many challenges in funding and delivering these courses, however:

- Fee-paying students are not counted toward the 12-student threshold for funding an Indigenous language course;
- Many school boards offer courses in limited grades only, typically the earlier ones, and there is a need for intermediate and advanced level courses;
- It was felt that staff do not effectively market language courses to students;
- Rigid teacher qualification and curriculum requirements often prevent people fluent in a language from teaching it; and
- Indigenous language teachers are growing older and will be hard to replace.

Several solutions were suggested:

- The ministry should update the Indigenous language allocation so that fee-paying students are recognized and/or smaller classes are funded;
- To deal with lack of fluent speakers who are also qualified teachers, co-teaching could be considered;
- Indigenous cultural/community centres could be funded to provide instruction; and
- Indigenous language instruction materials already developed outside Ontario could be adapted for use in the province.

Education service agreements and reverse education service agreements

Apart from the issue of language instruction, as noted above, the major concern with education service agreements was that First Nation students are paying an amount similar to that charged to international students. Not only is this hard on communities financially, participants said, it is also unfair because community members who earn income off territory are already supporting the school system through their taxes.

Participants suggested that the ministry re-visit the calculation of fees, and that the previous education service agreement working group, involving Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, school boards, Indigenous partners and other stakeholders, be re-established.

From the perspective of Ontario boards, one concern was that some First Nation students arrive under education service agreements without speaking English. It was suggested that funding used now for students born outside Canada might be made available to help them.

Other concerns included transportation costs, the costs of infrastructure built with provincial money that also supports First Nation students, the long timelines associated with negotiating agreements, and difficulty in collecting fees.

In regards to reverse education service agreements, Indigenous partners felt these arrangements to be beneficial, especially because First Nation enrolment is generally growing in areas where enrolment at other boards is dropping. A problem, however, is that boards can say no and often do. (French boards expressed reluctance because instruction in French is not typically offered in First Nation schools.) Indigenous partners urged greater commitment to partnerships that are mutually beneficial and above all meet the needs of students.

Truth and Reconciliation

One participant noted that even though this funding is time-limited, it should be used to ensure the building of reconciliation in the long term. There was also a comment that the use of the funding should be better defined.

Children and Youth in Care

There are about almost 16,000 children and youth in care in Ontario, of whom more than 6,000 are Crown wards. Since 2008, the Ministry of Education has partnered with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services on initiatives to improve educational outcomes for these young people.

In 2013-14, the ministry began funding school boards to design and put in place innovative strategies and delivery models to improve educational outcomes for students in the care of, or receiving services from, Children's Aid Societies. Several other strategies and initiatives support the same goal.

Initiatives for children and youth in care were previously funded through an EPO, but since 2014-15 funding has come from the Province's Poverty Reduction Strategy. Many students are eligible for additional targeted supports, for example the Learning Opportunities Grant, the Safe and Accepting Schools Allocation, and/or Indigenous education funding.

Participants were asked about the following broad areas:

- Whether targeted GSN funding effectively supports the needs of children and youth in care and whether funding could be allocated more effectively/efficiently;
- Accountability mechanisms to ensure that the often complex needs of these students are met, the sharing of best practices, and collaboration with Children's Aid Societies;
- Leveraging available data to better track educational outcomes and close achievement gaps for children and youth in care.

Supporting needs and allocation of funding

Participants noted that the cost of serving these students is high and that they often arrive at a school with significant challenges. Participants recognized, however, that the personal and societal costs of not addressing their problems would be much higher later.

Suggestions for using funding more effectively and efficiently included:

- Trying to intervene earlier, for example at the elementary school level;
- Providing funding directly to social workers;
- Funding programs outside of the core day, for example job coaching and training, to get them ready for workforce;
- Better recognizing that many of these students have unmet special education and other needs; and
- Increasing accountability for the outcomes and well-being of students in care.

Many children and youth in care move frequently, which can hamper efforts to help them. As one participant noted, "sometimes the only consistent thing in their lives is the school," but a move may take them to another school or even a different board. A strong suggestion was made that the ministry should cover the cost of transportation so that students could stay in their school.

Another transportation-related gap was the need for students to take part in a program at an agency outside the board's catchment area; a particular problem for rural and remote boards.

Indigenous partners were troubled by the disproportionate number of students from their communities who were in care and/or special education. They suggested targeted funding for boards and community organizations to develop culturally appropriate solutions.

Many participants talked about the increasing challenges that troubled teens face as they move past the age of 16. Homelessness among this group is not addressed, they said, and when these

students reach 18, they are generally moved onto social assistance. It was recommended that a support worker should be provided to help students through this transition and that those who want to complete their secondary school diploma should receive adequate funding. Support should also be in place for homeless students over 21 who are attempting to complete their diploma.

Accountability and sharing best practices

Participants suggested that there should be clear criteria for funding and referrals, because the better-presented cases are not always the ones with the greatest needs. Another suggestion was that the accountability model should be multi-layered and recognize the accountability of partners like the Children's Aid Society, not just the school board. Keeping funding flexible was strongly urged, since these students often need to have basic needs met before the curriculum happens.

One board suggested best practices could be shared at the Care and Treatment meetings that take place provincially four times a year.

Information and data

Many participants had concerns around information. As these students are supposed to be getting a "fresh start," they often arrive with little or no information about the needs of the students. Lack of information also hinders efforts to put the right supports in place. Participants asked for more clarity about access to information that partner organizations may have.

Once a student enters a system, one board suggested, specific data aligned with the student's needs and supports should be closely monitored on an individual basis.

Next Steps in Community Hubs

In August 2015, the Premier's Community Hub Framework Advisory Group made specific recommendations to help the Province review policies and develop a framework to adapt existing public properties to become community hubs. A One-Year Implementation Update on Community Hubs in Ontario subsequently summarized progress on implementing the recommendations.

In May 2016, the Ministry of Education released a memorandum to outline three supports for community hubs in schools:

- Amendments to Ontario Regulation 444/98, which deals with the disposition of surplus real property;
- Enhanced education capital funding to support community hubs in schools; and
- Additional child care retrofit funding.

Participants were asked about:

- The amendments to O. Reg. 444/98, which extend the time a property is circulated among potential public sector buyers and broadens the list of buyers;
- Other types of capital or other initiatives/programs the ministry should consider to encourage more community hubs and partnerships in schools;
- Common information that would be useful in either locating or operating a community hub in a school;
- How school boards and other partners might work together to support the government's commitment to create additional child care spaces and Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres;
- How they might work together more effectively in general, especially around financial arrangements; and
- The impact on school boards of requiring that space leased to child care and early years providers be guaranteed for a minimum number of years.

Amendments to O. Reg. 444/98

Most participants expressed their satisfaction with the changes. Indigenous partners, however, were concerned that there is still no guarantee that if they invest in a property, they will get the investment back if the property is sold. There was a similar concern where the church had invested in a Catholic school property.

On extending the circulation period, several boards wondered if the ministry would look at interim funding to support building operation during the longer period.

In some instances, many said, 180 days was still not enough time. Not all areas of the province enjoy strong real estate markets, and dispositions are especially difficult in the North. Community groups might be able to use the space, but can't pay market value; there were suggestions for some mechanism to make up the difference. One board recommended that leases to other boards should also be at fair market value.

Catholic boards noted that their properties are often next to a church or even partially on church property, which complicates dispositions.

Other types of capital or other initiatives/programs

Many boards noted that it is easier to accommodate a hub in a new build because of needing security and physical separation of partner space. Even in a new build, however, more partners make it harder and more costly to design and build a facility, and boards were concerned that the capital formula does not recognize this. Despite concerns, boards and other participants acknowledged opportunities to be creative.

A major concern was added operating costs. One board mentioned that space for hub partners should be reflected in the school's utilization rate. Another participant suggested the ministry should dictate the rate that partners could be charged. Even with set charges, however, many

potential partners are unable to pay the full cost of being in the hub. Several argued that where that is the case, schools need ongoing operating funding.

There were tensions around what services might be offered in the hub, and whether some should be offered only outside the school day. Some said hubs should be used for student achievement purposes only, while others took a broader view.

One participant noted that the demographics, tastes and behaviour of the local community would shape service offerings. The possibility was raised, for example, that parents might not want a psychologist's office in a school. In areas of older population, there was more interest in having age-friendly services. Catholic boards were concerned that partners be in keeping with the teachings of the church.

Indigenous partners expressed a hope for a vision to recognize the potential to deliver services supporting overall well-being at schools, especially in remote and rural areas. They identified a desperate need for more children's mental health support in particular.

One board spoke to how hub funding might support special education. For example, a large urban board is creating a clinical hub in a school to support children with complex special education needs. That board, however, has access to a wide range of community partners, space and resources. The question was whether or how this model could be applied in smaller cities and rural locations.

One group suggested that:

- Hub resources, initiatives and processes should be aligned across ministries to better engage with community partners;
- The ministry should consider rolling the EPO grant for Community Outreach into the GSN.

Child care and early years

There were questions raised about the plan to create 100,000 new child care spaces, in terms of where they would be located and, for francophone boards, what language they would operate in. Boards cited examples of investments in child care spaces that were taken up only very slowly. Another concern was the shortage of enough early childhood educators to support the expansion.

One board suggested the ministry should fund operating and capital costs of childcare spaces in schools to improve affordability and streamline financial arrangements.

Additional issues included:

- Confusion about the respective roles of consolidated municipal service managers and boards;

- Decreasing municipal support for childcare, despite a need for municipal service managers to share in the childcare commitment;
- The fear of assimilation expressed by francophone boards, who said that they were often at the mercy of largely Anglophone municipalities that did not understand their realities;
- The risk that a ministry desire for child care partners to reimburse boards for their space could lead to a reduction of school-based day care in areas where parents can't afford high fees and subsidy funding is insufficient.
- The inability of a board to offer extended day programs (often because of competition by free programs offered at other sites) or their costliness if required to.

Information to support decisions about where to locate/operate hubs

Several boards said they used community surveys to gauge interest in child care space, and environmental scans and surveys to determine whether a community hub should be incorporated into a school. Some suggested the ministry should provide demographic data to determine what kinds of community hubs are best suited to particular areas of the community.

For possible hub partners, helpful information might include the cost, school age and location, available space and parking, whether there are separate entrances, and transit availability.

Working with community partners

There was a concern about “mixed messaging” on hubs, with communities hearing that the Province was promoting them, but partners not committing, likely due to the cost.

Reluctance might also stem from the risk the school might close in future, it was suggested. There are fewer partners than expected, one participant said, and fewer qualified people to run hub programs than needed. Francophone boards said they faced special challenges finding francophone partners.

On the added administrative burden of creating and running hubs, a suggestion was to fund staff time (a principal, vice-principal or property manager) specifically to manage hubs. There were concerns that principals were unable to supervise hub staff. It was also seen as important that partners not have priority over school boards in accessing space.

Many were concerned that the involvement of municipalities was adding red tape to hub creation. There was a suggestion that processes need to be streamlined generally. And while municipalities are well suited as partners, some noted that they often have excess space themselves in areas with underutilized schools and others said municipal financial support was slow in coming even where hubs made sense.

It was suggested that the province, municipalities and school boards work together on a clear community hubs policy that outlined appropriate funding sources.

Impact on school boards of lease commitments

A common concern was that if a board needed the space back before a longer-term lease expired, this would disadvantage the students who are their primary focus. Longer terms would also hamper accommodation reviews.

Other comments on hubs

Participants also said that:

- The Province must provide best practices and lead the process;
- The Ministry of Education needs to have cross-ministry discussions;
- Some boards are getting money for community hubs that they can't use but can't spend on other areas, like special education.
- Indigenous friendship centres are already hubs and should be recognized for that.

School Board Administration and Governance compliance

An element of enhancing public confidence in Ontario's education system is ensuring proper accountability for funding. In 2014-15, the ministry began phasing in a new allocation model for the School Board Administration and Governance Grant. Spending under the grant is enveloped and board administration expenditures are limited to a specific allocation.

Participants were asked to consider:

- The challenges a board might face in complying with the enveloping provisions; and
- Ways in which the ministry might ensure compliance with the enveloping provisions.

Challenges

Many boards reported significant pressure on their administrative budgets from:

- Legal fees relating to human rights challenges, human resource issues and labour relations;
- Benefit costs related to non-unionized employees;
- Implementing new initiatives and meeting new reporting requirements;
- Changes to sick leave provisions and the rising costs of sick leave and other absenteeism;
- Board office software and internet connectivity;
- Document and data management; and
- Attendance management services, supply teachers, case management and physician referral fees.

Small boards reported feeling the most pressure, as many staff members have multiple responsibilities already.

On salaries, some boards said they are seeing increasing instances of staff leaving for another board because owing to salary freezes that is the only way to get a raise. Salary benchmarks are felt to be too low, and it was suggested that implementation of the freeze affected boards disproportionately.

Suggestions included:

- Adding a component specific to child care/hubs to administrative funding;
- Reviewing the impact of the new model on boards that saw large reductions;
- Continuing to streamline EPOs;
- Including a component in every EPO to cover administrative costs;
- Requiring/encouraging more partnerships and sharing between coterminous boards to reduce costs;
- Basing the funding on specific projects and cost pressures, not just demographics and enrolment numbers; and
- Giving boards more flexibility in the use of proceeds of disposal of properties.

Boards also reported challenges around class size limits. For example, while they can still meet the required averages, some still have larger classes in some schools, which can be a problem for classroom capacity. Predicting exact enrolment is difficult, which can mean either over- or under-staffing from year to year.

Ensuring compliance

The ministry was advised by boards not to put in place more restrictions on the use of funding, but instead trust boards to manage themselves and trustees to ensure accountability.

If further restrictions were to be placed, boards advised consulting with education stakeholders beforehand.

In terms of actions the ministry might take with non-compliant boards, the suggestion was to talk to a board before acting to get a better sense of why it is non-compliant.

Further Transformation of Other Transfer Payments

Participants had several suggestions:

- Move EPO funding into the GSN as quickly as possible when it is clearly meant to be long-term, and bundle EPO funding into major categories, not individual grants;
- Continue to streamline processes and grants;
- Work across ministries and within the ministry to simplify grants, processes and approvals and make better use of resources;
- Review funding with the goal of understanding and addressing the changing nature of student needs, especially around mental health, identity and transitions;

- Review the transportation funding formula because of rising costs, including the impact of new procurement rules and a driver shortage, and set provincial benchmarks, including a uniform “walk distance” for boards;
- Provide predictable and sustainable funding for school repairs and allow wider use of Education Development Charges for building and repairing schools;
- Review the provincial funding benchmarks for information technology;
- Review the initial funding benchmark differences that came into effect with the initial creation of GSN allocation model;
- Consider the consequences of changes on boards of all sizes, and do not overlook School Authorities;
- Before new initiatives (either capital or operating) are announced, consider how boards will fund them on an ongoing basis; and
- Consider the human infrastructure needed to keep the system running properly.

Other topics

Other concerns, issues and topics that participants raised included:

- Need for clearer communication of ministry decisions and direction and better timing of announcements;
- Collect information about boards across the province to help set context and identify anomalous situations;
- Need for more in-depth and rigorous research and evidence to reduce new initiatives that threaten coherence and fail to consider or measure outcomes;
- What many called “professional development day fatigue;”
- The supports needed for students with special education needs after the age of 18, which boards sometimes cover even though they are not specifically funded;
- Investments needed to comply with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, ensure full-day kindergarten spaces in fast-growing areas and maintain administrative buildings;
- The need for accountability, especially around targeted funding such as is provided for special education or Indigenous education, to include the relevant community and broaden measures of outcomes beyond the financial;
- The need for deeper and more continuous engagement through the year with First Nation, Métis and Inuit partners;
- The treatment of First Nation schools, which are under federal jurisdiction, as “private schools” in Ontario and the difficulties sharing ideas, professional development and innovative approaches between First Nation and Ontario systems;
- Greater consideration of the impacts of unexpected funding announcements, especially for capital, and recognition that especially in smaller communities there is limited capacity in the building industry to meet competing boards’ demands;
- Various challenges created by collective bargaining processes and outcomes;
- The need for more subtle distinctions in students’ interests and capabilities than the current “Applied” and “Academic” streams;
- Lack of standard course codes across boards, which complicates postsecondary admission; and
- Problems with the functionality or availability of various on-line tools/platforms provided by the ministry

Participants expressed satisfaction with a new feature of the engagement process, which made subject matter experts readily available during discussions to answer technical questions.

There was a suggestion that participants at the sessions might be given more options to take part in topics more closely aligned to their interests and/or expertise.

Indigenous partners suggested more time to review materials before the sessions, as discussing issues with their communities can take considerable time.