



Bluewater District School Board

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April 12, 2019

The Honourable Lisa Thompson
Minister of Education
Mowat Block
22nd Floor
900 Bay St.
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1L2

Dear Minister Thompson:

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of Bluewater District School Board, we are writing to share our concerns regarding the implications for our students and board in light of recent provincial announcements on proposed changes in education. We are also seeking ways to foster an ongoing collaborative dialogue and meaningful consultation with the provincial government. We want to work together to find solutions that mitigate significant negative impacts on our students and local rural education. As you are aware, we are a primarily rural school board covering a large geographic area with a dispersed student population.

Class size

Our main area of concern is the proposed change to class sizes, particularly at the secondary level. Your proposed increase in secondary class size numbers will result in a reduction of approximately 40 to 50 full time equivalent teaching staff positions within our board. It would be equivalent to closing two of our nine secondary schools. This would amount to a substantial loss in both teaching and programming support for our students, and the inability of our small high schools to provide specialized course options, and even the core curriculum required to graduate.

Staffing reductions/program options for students

With the provincial government's proposed four-year attrition process to reduce the number of teaching staff positions, we are concerned that it will become increasingly difficult for us to replace teachers who retire with qualifications and experience in specialized areas. We are currently able to offer a number of diverse program options, which will be put at risk without the ability to replace with appropriate qualified staff. We need to ensure that a variety of course options are available to ALL students, to position them for their future success in a competitive global environment.

Mandatory credits via eLearning

Another area of concern is the proposed mandatory four credits through centralized eLearning. While this would present some complications to local collective agreements given that courses of this nature have customarily been taught by our own teachers, we are worried about the effects on students. Recent data has shown us a low completion rate of independent learning courses among Ontario students. Over the past several years, our board has made great gains with a blended learning model that embraces technology, while ensuring that students have face to face interaction with teachers within our jurisdiction. Access to online technology continues to be a barrier for some within our rural communities, which presents potential challenges in terms of equity. There are also questions in regard to the impact that centralized eLearning would have on students with special needs. Not all students would easily adapt to eLearning without the guidance and expertise of local teaching staff.

Curriculum changes

We look forward to receiving more details on a number of other proposed curriculum related changes, such as mathematics, the incorporation of financial literacy, Indigenous studies, and the Health and Physical Education curriculum. It is encouraging to hear about the provincial government's renewed focus in areas such as STEM, the skilled trades, as well as financial and digital literacy. Further to this, our board is proud of the unique programming being provided in the areas of the arts and agriculture (STEAM). We are committed to continued progress in these pathways, and we look forward to our continued work together realizing our board's vision of "Preparing Our Students Today for the World of Tomorrow".

Local Priorities Fund

We welcome the news of increases in funding for the delivery of transportation and utilities. However, our board will need to find ways to address the elimination of the Local Priorities Fund, and assess the impact on current levels of service that we provide in areas that include our special needs students.

Ontario Autism Program

There is concern that our schools do not have adequate resources to provide the appropriate levels of service should there be a dramatic increase in the number of students identified with autism spectrum disorder. As our most vulnerable students, specialized programming and supports are required that extend beyond what our teaching staff are realistically able to deliver in a traditional classroom setting.

Through your long time service as a Member of Provincial Parliament and experience within one of our local ridings, we are aware of the many ways in which you have demonstrated your support of small rural communities, and know that you share our goal of ensuring that our students in both urban and rural areas have equal opportunities to learn and succeed.

We request that you, as Minister of Education, reconsider the recent proposals and funding cuts, and consult with your education partners in a meaningful way to ensure the New Vision for Education matches what is best for ALL students.

As always, our commitment remains focused on providing quality education for every student in a safe and caring environment.

Sincerely,



Jan Johnstone
Chair



Jane Thomson
Vice-Chair

cc: All school board chairs in Ontario
Ontario Public School Boards' Association
MPP Bill Walker, Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound
MPP Lisa Thompson, Huron-Bruce

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