

Ministry of Education

Minister

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Dear Colleagues,

It will come as no surprise that, over the past several months, our government has been hearing from many parts of Ontario about the impacts of recent pupil accommodation reviews, particularly in Ontario's rural and remote communities. Our government supports and values all communities in Ontario, and our school boards and municipalities must make every effort to work together to ultimately support positive experiences for our students and the communities they live in.

As you know, school closures and consolidations are among the most difficult decisions that school boards have to make. This is especially true in our rural and remote communities. Ontario entrusts school boards with the responsibility to review their school accommodation needs and for ensuring that student achievement and well-being are supported by all accommodation decisions that are made.

However, we also know that some parts of Ontario face demographic challenges, while others are seeing considerable growth. We want to assure all of our community partners that our government is committed to finding solutions to meet both local needs and the educational needs of Ontario's students.

Starting this spring, our government will launch an engagement on new approaches to supporting education in rural and remote communities. Three Parliamentary Assistants, MPPs Granville Anderson, Grant Crack, and Lou Rinaldi, will gather feedback on how our province can further strengthen the future of rural education. We are also pleased to provide you with an update on how our government will further support local decision-making and complete communities moving forward.

Pursuing Joint-Use Opportunities between School Boards

Communities and the province expect Ontario's four school systems to maximize the opportunities of co-location. Prior to commencing with student accommodation changes through closures, it is our government's strong preference that school boards fully explore joint accommodation arrangements with coterminous boards, particularly to maintain a school presence in a rural or isolated community. Of the 4,900 schools in Ontario, only 37 are currently joint-use arrangements in which pupils from one or more boards share a facility.

In July 2013, prior to the launch of the Ministry of Education's 2014 Capital Priorities program, the Ministry stated a preference for these joint-use projects, committing to review these proposals before any others. Additionally, the Ministry of Education has committed \$600,000 to assist school boards in pursuing joint-use school opportunities between school boards. This funding is being allocated to support school boards with facilitation and joint planning towards the potential development of joint-use school proposals, as well as on studies being commissioned by the Ministry of Education to highlight joint-use experiences and develop a joint-use school toolkit that can be used to assist school boards in developing joint-use schools.

Moving forward, the Ministry of Education will be reviewing all capital proposals submitted by school boards for ministry funding for new schools, additions or consolidation projects to ensure joint-use opportunities between boards have been fully explored before funding is granted.

Importance of School Board and Municipal Partnerships

We have recently had the pleasure of speaking with many of our municipal and school board partners. These conversations have highlighted many positive examples of collaboration and joint local planning between school boards and municipalities. But we have also heard about potential inconsistencies and difficulties in current community collaboration, including instances where municipalities and communities have not felt meaningfully engaged in pupil accommodation reviews. These difficulties can arise for many reasons, but we would like to remind school boards and municipalities of the tools we have provided to facilitate an effective process and provincial expectations with respect to engagement by involved parties:

- **Annual Community Consultation:** Reforms to Ontario's *Planning Act* and *Development Charges Act* were made in 2015 to help create more complete communities and to provide citizens a greater, more meaningful say in how their neighbourhoods grow. The Ministry of Education's *Community Planning and Partnerships Guideline* was also introduced in 2015 to ensure that each school board hosted at least one meeting each year to discuss their capital plans and opportunities for joint planning and facility partnerships with relevant communities and stakeholders. We have heard from some boards that these meetings are not well attended, and from some communities that they were not aware of them. It is imperative that these meetings involve all relevant stakeholders, and facilitate real dialogue between boards and the involved communities. Further, board policies must reflect this guideline prior to the commencement of new accommodation reviews. To be effective, these meetings require community engagement and attendance and a spirit of real partnership from all parties.

- **Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline:** Updates to the Pupil Accommodation review guideline in 2015 were introduced following consultations with school boards, municipalities and other community partners to enable a more effective review process. This included a new requirement that impacted municipalities and community partners are consulted regarding the potential accommodation changes. It is our expectation that this is a meaningful engagement from both boards and municipalities, and that full input and feedback from the municipalities, including local economic and community impacts where relevant are reflected in the final staff report and advice to trustees. The new process also requires boards to put forward concrete proposals in the form of initial staff recommendations. These should not be interpreted as pre-determined outcomes, but rather as a means to ensure focused engagement.

Our government expects school boards and communities to be making active and continual efforts to facilitate positive, inclusive relationships with each-other.

The changes made in 2015 to the Pupil Accommodation Review Guideline also changed the minimum requirement for the school information profiles shared at the commencement of an accommodation review to no longer require information outlining the value of the school to the local economy. This change was made to reflect input from school boards that this information was not readily available or in their area of expertise and could be better reflected in the input from municipal and community partners.

While accommodation decisions must support student achievement and well-being as a primary goal, this change was not intended to discount the importance of engagement with communities to understand the impact of accommodation changes or to disallow boards from considering the impacts on communities and local economies from their final reports or deliberations.

Going forward, our government will be considering how community impact could be included in the pupil accommodation process, included with anticipated impacts on student achievement, transportation and outcomes. We will work with municipalities and school boards to explore how the government can best support this type of analysis in the pupil accommodation review process.

Enabling Community Hubs in Schools

Through the Premier's special advisor Karen Pitre, our government has been considering how we can use public property in a manner that takes into account the best interests of local communities. A community hub can be a school, neighbourhood centre or other public space that offers co-ordinated services such as education, early years support, health care and social services.

Many schools have some space that is or could be used by community organizations through lease or other arrangements when the space is not required for school use. The province has encouraged school boards to work with local communities and in 2015 released the Ministry of Education's Community Planning Partnership Guideline to help facilitate these opportunities.

We have also made a number of investments to support this goal, including:

- **Capital Funding for Community Hub School Retrofits:** The Ministry of Education announced \$50 million in November 2016 to support retrofits of available school space for use by new community partners, or improve accessibility for schools to enable community use.
- **Capital Funding for Community Replacement Space:** In the event that an original school location that housed community partnerships is closed or sold, capital funding will be available for replacement space for eligible community partners in new schools, additions or retrofits to existing schools. Details regarding eligibility for this new program will be announced ahead of the Ministry of Education's 2017 Capital Priorities program request for submissions.

Surplus schools have also been identified as potential community hubs in some communities, and our government is serious about taking the next steps on this strategy:

- **New Rules for Disposition or Lease of Surplus Property:** Changes to O. Reg. 444/98 doubled the current minimum surplus school circulation period from 90 to 180 days, and expanded the list of organizations that can place an offer before surplus school property is placed on the open market. This is intended to enable potential community hub projects to reuse surplus school properties where there is a viable business plan and identified partnerships necessary to develop a community hub
- **Disposition of Surplus School Board property:** In 2017-18, we will also be proceeding with the recommendation in the Community Hubs Strategic Framework and Action Plan to consider supporting the sale of surplus schools at less than fair market value, where there is a provincial interest to enable viable community hubs, while keeping school boards whole.
- **Community Hubs Summit:** We are also pleased to announce that the Ontario Community Hubs Summit will be held from May 1-3, 2017, which will feature keynote speakers, hands-on workshops and opportunities to interact with and learn from others.

Recognizing that planning for strategic partnerships cannot be developed quickly or easily, in instances where communities and school boards see innovative solutions to local needs with opportunities for potential community hubs in school properties involved in accommodation reviews, we are requesting that school boards and municipalities with opportunities advise the Ministry of Education's Capital Policy and Programs Branch and the Ministry of Infrastructure's Community Hubs Division at community.hubs@ontario.ca preferably before the Community Hubs Summit. We will endeavor to work with the partners to ensure that these opportunities are considered within existing resources. In some cases, this could include providing facilitation services that would help community organizations, municipalities, and school boards develop their proposals for community hubs.

Enhancing Education in Rural and Remote Communities

Ontario's rural and remote communities have been impacted by a diversity of socio-economic trends. We also know that the future will not look like the past. For our rural communities to thrive, our government knows that students must be supported by high-quality education, strong local community programming, and innovative local economic strategies. That's why we've taken the following actions to support our rural and remote schools:

- **Supporting Broadband Expansion:** Our government is moving forward with its commitment in the 2016 Ontario Budget to provide secure, affordable broadband access to all of Ontario's students and educators, especially in northern and remote parts of Ontario, to enable equitable access to rich and innovative learning opportunities.
- **Supporting E-Learning Opportunities:** Our government provides secure access to the provincial Virtual Learning Environment which supports delivery of eLearning courses that otherwise might not be available close to a student's home. Additionally, we are investing over \$6 million for distance learning delivery by the Independent Learning Centre of TVO that helps students from a variety of backgrounds gain necessary education credentials. Together these support equitable and timely access to credit courses.
- **Remote & Rural Funding Support for School Boards:** We have made the education funding formula less dependent on enrolment. Since 2012-13, annual GSN funding for rural boards has increased by nearly \$200 million or 5.7 per cent. In addition, we have made the following changes the funding formula to meet the unique needs of rural and remote communities:
 - Increased funding to support the higher cost of purchasing goods and services for small and rural school boards;

- Investments in top-up supports for rural schools to fund the heating, lighting and maintenance costs of excess spaces in schools that are a considerable distance from the next closest school;
- Introduced new factors that reflect distance and dispersion of schools in the distribution of special education funding;
- Funding for additional principals in schools that combine elementary and secondary students, depending on enrolment levels; and
- Funding to support a minimum number of teachers and early childhood educators for remote schools with small enrolment.

It is our hope that our engagement this coming spring will allow us to highlight further opportunities that will proactively enhance the quality and delivery of education in rural and remote communities in Ontario. We will work with our partners to finalize the details of this engagement process and share these in the coming weeks.

Conclusion

There are a number of initiatives across government that are working to ensure that we have complete communities – whether they are urban, rural, northern or remote. Each community has different needs and together we need to make sure we are working together.

We welcome your thoughts and suggestions as we continue to evolve to meet the changing demographics and needs of our communities.

Sincerely,

[Original Signed by]

Hon. Mitzie Hunter

[Original Signed by]

Hon. Bob Chiarelli

cc: Hon. Bill Mauro, Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs
Hon. Jeff Leal, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs
Association of Municipalities of Ontario
Rural Ontario Municipal Association
Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA)
Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA)
L'Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'Ontario (ACÉPO),
L'Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques (AFOCSC);

