

## Consultation Summary

Excellence in education begins with our commitment to Ontario's students. Above all else, our investments in Ontario's publicly funded education system must ensure that our students have access to a high quality, world-class education that prepares them for future success.

In these challenging fiscal times that means working together to make sure that we make the most efficient use of our resources. Together, we must find new and creative ways to modernize and transform the way that funding is used at the ministry, board, school, and class level.

That is why your advice continues to be so crucial. I would like to thank you for your insights and candor in sharing your views with us through the School Board Efficiencies and Modernization consultation process. Your contributions have been invaluable in helping us develop the Grants for Student Needs funding regulations for the 2014-15 school year and beyond. I am confident that the changes we are making will be in the best interest for our students and will ensure that Ontario's publicly funded education system remains one of the greatest in the world.

Over the coming year, we intend to continue working collaboratively with the education community on developing more new ideas for improving the delivery of education in Ontario. I know that I can count on your support as partners who recognize that investing in our children's education is investing in our province's future.

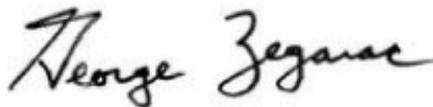


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The valuable insights provided by education stakeholders in the School Board Efficiencies and Modernization consultation process are an important step in introducing fresh and innovative ideas into Ontario's education system. Based on your advice, a measured and phased approach to promoting more efficient use of school space will begin in 2014-15 and continue in future years.

Making better use of school space is important if Ontario's schools are to continue progressing from great to excellent. Better use of school space means more resources for the classroom, more innovative community partnerships, and more opportunities for students to learn and grow.

There is still much that remains to be done. We look forward to continue working with you over the course of the coming years to modernize Ontario's education system and find new and better ways to improve the learning environments for our students.



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## Introduction

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In the 2013 Budget, the Ontario Government announced its commitment to collaborate on developing an Efficiencies and Modernisation Strategy:

To achieve long-term sustainability in school board funding, the government will introduce an efficiencies and modernization savings strategy. The Ministry of Education will engage education stakeholders and will work with school boards on the strategy. Savings under this strategy will start in the 2014–15 school year. (pg. 124)

In November 2013, the Ministry of Education fulfilled this commitment by holding consultations to gather ideas about how to enable a more efficient and modern education system. These consultations brought Ministry officials together with:

- School board representatives, including directors of education, senior school board officials, and trustee associations;
- Principals and vice-principals;
- Teachers' federations;
- CUPE and other support staff unions;
- The Minister's Advisory Council on Special Education;
- Parent groups (People for Education, Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations, Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education, and Parents partenaires en education); and
- Student groups (Ontario Student Trustees Association, Regroupement des élèves conseiller. ère.s francophones de l'Ontario, Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne).

Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to offer their input into this strategy as Ontario, like other jurisdictions, grapples with continuing fiscal pressure. They acknowledged that the recent pattern of annual increases in education funding is no longer sustainable. They also recognized that making school boards more modern and efficient helps to maximize the resources ultimately available to support student achievement.

The Ministry provided a paper before the consultations that identified a number of discussion areas and invited participants to raise their own ideas. This report summarizes the major points raised. It parallels the guide's structure and provides an additional section for participants' ideas.

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## Underutilized and small schools

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### Better use of school space for boards, students and communities

A very strong consensus emerged in the consultations; there are many opportunities to make more efficient use of school space. For many, this issue went beyond the need to address the current fiscal realities and related to getting the most value from public assets for boards, students and communities while keeping schools viable.

Sharing space was identified as one possible element in a strategy to use school infrastructure more efficiently. Other elements could include consolidating and/or closing schools. There was recognition that any strategy around more efficient use would need to:

- recognize the importance of schools in small, more remote, and francophone communities;
- value underutilized space as a potential community resource; and
- ensure Ministry expectations and funding policies are not disconnected from effective decision-making at the local level.

There were several suggestions for improvement to the current accommodation review committee (ARC) process, which boards must follow to close a school. Detailed below, they touched on setting clear timeframes, creating simpler processes in straightforward situations and providing financial help to move reviews along.

### Larger and smaller schools both offer unique benefits

The school board sector noted that there is no conclusive research as to whether small or large schools are better for students, although larger schools generally offer a wider range of programs, particularly at the secondary level. Student representatives agreed, but noted that smaller schools can be easier to navigate and more cohesive. Student representatives also suggested that on-line courses can help overcome programming limitations or expand program offerings. Special education advocates pointed to research and personal experience suggesting that students with challenges do better in smaller schools.

### The gains from more efficient use

Reducing unused space in schools, whether by bringing in new partners or consolidating schools, offers a number of benefits. Under both approaches, school boards are no longer directing resources towards heating, lighting, cleaning and maintaining empty space. When a school consolidates, operating costs per student often fall, although it was noted that there may be up-front capital costs related to the larger student population, such as renovations or additions, for the receiving school.

At present, roughly 70% of Ontario's schools receive financial support ("top-up") to offset costs associated with space that is idle or not being used for core educational purposes. Additionally, almost 500 very small schools receive an enhanced form of this financial support ("enhanced top-up"). These supports take several forms, including help with operating and renovation costs, and funding for principals and secretaries in each school regardless of size. There was recognition in the consultations that these funding sources act as disincentives to finding better use for school space.

Where closures are concerned, there are other disincentives to efficiency. It was noted that the ARC process is lengthy, contentious and costly to boards, but the financial benefit goes largely to the Province. After a closure, the board loses provincial funding but often has added busing costs. As well, while it no longer has to pay the costs of maintaining an open school, it must keep the closed building insured, secured and protected from vandalism and deterioration until disposition.

### **Strong support for sharing space**

There was wide support for locating other service providers in underutilized schools under certain conditions. Participants raised existing examples of facility partnerships in Ontario, including child care, co-locating schools with community centres, and providing services offered by other provincial ministries in a school building. Some saw major advantages in delivering such services as children's mental health or municipal libraries in a school setting. However, others noted possible barriers:

- The community may not always be comfortable with the idea of shared space with a particular partner;
- Allowing more users onto school property places additional demands on the time of school staff and student safety and liability are also concerns;
- Non-profits, like daycare and/or community centres, cannot afford to pay rents that cover board's costs, and a school may lose the financial support noted above if renting to a for-profit tenant;
- Forming and managing partnerships is time-consuming, and while there is often talk of partnerships during the ARC process, actual commitment is rare.

Many participants wondered how existing silos (for example, ministry-ministry, school board-municipality) that hamper partnerships could be broken down. One question was whether the prohibition some boards place on sharing space with private schools was appropriate. The need to include school boards in municipal and provincial planning and development discussions was also raised.

### **The benefits of joint school facilities**

Co-locating the schools of coterminous boards in the same facility was an idea with fairly broad support, although participants stressed there should be separate principals and other key staff. There was general agreement that students in such buildings would be able to share specialized facilities, such as gyms and labs, at different times. Some participants also suggested sharing special education services and facilities. A number of constraints to sharing were noted, however:

- A limit on what a board can charge another board means it cannot fully recover its costs;
- Co-ownership involves the development of complex ownership and operating agreements;
- The school with the larger student body might dominate a joint facility; and
- In some French-language boards, there was some hesitation about sharing with English students because of the assimilation risk.

In terms of what could be done to promote joint use, it was suggested that:

- Ministry capital analysts could review larger geographical areas and make recommendations for joint use, relieving the pressure on any one board to reach out to other boards to work together;
- The Province should review O. Reg. 444/98, which governs the sale of surplus school board property, to make empty buildings and space more readily available to other boards;
- A dispute resolution process is needed, so that one board cannot single-handedly decide to end a sharing relationship;
- Principals of schools in joint facilities should co-manage equally, despite the relative enrolments of their schools;
- Creating a stronger shared service mentality through other efforts (discussed later) would make joint use easier to implement; and
- Communities need to be reminded that larger, joint schools can provide more for students, such as access to broader range of programs and extra-curricular opportunities, and maintain a board's presence in the community.

### **Valuing schools in remote areas**

The consultations suggested that, depending on their location, different strategies were needed for rural and remote schools.

There was universal recognition that closing schools has wider impacts in small, remote communities than elsewhere. These include making it harder to attract new families and retain existing ones, especially if the alternative is a long bus ride to the closest school. Because the school is often the last public sector organization in the community, partnering may be impossible. Any strategy must acknowledge these realities.

This did not mean automatic support for all schools defined as “rural.” Some schools designated as rural by postal code are in areas increasingly tied to nearby urban centres and should no longer be considered rural. Additional funding allocated to these schools can discourage boards from taking steps to make better use of this space, even when such decisions might be beneficial to students. A number of participants felt that distance from another school in the same board, rather than postal code, was a better measure of “ruralness.”

### **Building a better ARC**

There was a general consensus that a consistent process, such as that offered through ARC, is necessary to help guide decisions on school space. Board representatives said, however, that even when boards want to close underutilized schools, because staff believed it would make sense from a program and operations perspective, the current ARC process makes this unnecessarily difficult. Community members argue that there are funding incentives for small/underutilized schools; trustees are concerned about how constituents will respond to the process; and, the community may request an administrative review by the Ministry after the ARC process is finished. Boards also said that ARCs take a school-level, or family-of-schools perspective, but a system-level approach would support better allocation of resources.

Although parents and others disagreed, board representatives generally felt that ARC timelines are too long, and not an efficient use of resources. In terms of the options the ARC process can lay out to the community, many felt there should be either more options or more openness about limits to the options (although a few participants felt too many options were offered in some cases).

Boards suggested that the Ministry could improve the process by:

- Providing a maximum time for the review to be completed, as well as reducing the minimum time in some cases;
- Covering some costs of the ARC review, such as facilitation, in the short term;
- Setting standards and providing tools to trigger automatic review: for example, a pre-set utilization level of 60% or 75%, combined with a negative facility condition report;
- Using stronger incentives to get action on the schools under review, such as funding that favoured the most effective arrangements;
- Creating streams for the review process that would set out various classes of potential closures, allowing simpler cases to be handled more quickly and at lower cost; and
- Considering a role for the Ministry or other third party in accommodation decisions.

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### **Declining enrolment**

About two-thirds of education funding is based on enrolment. The number of school-age children in Ontario has been decreasing in recent years, and enrolment is currently declining in 53 of 72 school boards. While over-all enrolment is projected to grow starting next year, it will generally continue to decline in many parts of the province.

Board costs do not decrease proportionally as enrolment falls. The Declining Enrolment Adjustment recognizes that it takes time for boards to adjust costs and is intended to help boards manage as enrolment falls. It is transitional funding and so reduces over time. Other supports for declining enrolment are not transitional: for example, the Supported Schools Allocation provides additional funding for teaching staff to improve the viability of low-enrolment schools that are far from other schools of the board. In some areas, challenges like distances that prevent school consolidation will continue no matter what the level of enrolment, and the Ministry was cautioned about the impacts of changing funding in those instances.

A teacher representative spoke about northern Ontario: “The schools are like ghost towns.... You have directors and superintendents looking after eight schools, but next door the same number of staff are looking after 20. At some point, do we start to talk about sharing those administrative-level people?” A board in a remote area agreed with that direction. Parent groups echoed the concern about the impact in the north, where many aboriginal learners, often facing challenges, are located. It was noted that technology could help fill program gaps, but serious constraints – discussed below in “Other ideas” – must first be addressed.

A teacher representative said that the School Foundation Grant, which provides funding for a principal and secretary in every school, is not being used as intended to support some of the most rural/remote schools with declining enrolment, because boards may be using the funds for other purposes. Principals echoed this concern. Both groups worried that school leadership was being diluted, especially in the north, creating significant safety and security risks. In smaller schools, principals are often assigned teaching, or other duties, despite needing to be available for the principal role. Another concern was principals covering two or three schools, often with long driving distances between them. One principal referred to the use of the School Foundation Grant as a major “disconnect between government aims and reality.”

School boards commented that the Ministry may need to look at an enrolment-based model for the School Foundation Grant. Under current methodology, two schools in the same board sharing a campus are seen as one, when in fact each may need its own administrative staff.

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## **Accountability**

### **Creating a more efficient and strategic approach**

Accountability frameworks typically establish high-level expectations about desired outcomes. Those responsible for outcomes align lower-level activities and measures with these. Reporting measures progress towards the desired outcomes and helps ensure proper use of funds. There was a sense that the Ministry, which should be focusing on high-level outcomes, was instead collecting uncoordinated data on inputs and outputs. For many, highly detailed reporting, especially on the many funding lines of Educational Programs: Other (EPO), was seen as cumbersome and taking resources away from the front lines. The advice was that whatever the accountability and reporting framework, it should be more efficient and more strategic.

### **EPO grants: reducing reporting volume while maintaining effectiveness**

The Ministry's preference for strong accountability around policy-aligned grants is key to achieving important province-wide goals. School boards, on the other hand, tend to prefer greater flexibility in the use of funding and less reporting. School board representatives agreed that EPO funding represents only a small portion of total funding, but brings additional reporting requirements. Representatives suggested that there are too many EPO initiatives which sometimes involve more in reporting costs than what the board is allocated in funding. Problems of this nature are especially acute for small boards: one school board representative said flatly that "reporting kills some boards."

Some practical measures to reduce the reporting burden were suggested:

- Strategically cluster funds together instead of having a large number of individual pots, or allow boards to choose the best ones for their needs from a menu of EPO items;
- Standardize and centralize reporting at the Ministry to reduce duplication;
- Flow EPO amounts based on the composition of each board;
- Set a minimum threshold (for example, \$50,000) for detailed reporting; and
- Consider multi-year funding, particularly where there are staffing implications, with no more than three EPOs in one year.

The topic of centrally directed, province-wide initiatives was raised. School board participants felt the Ministry should consider including boards in discussions of the purpose, resource requirements and performance measures for an EPO fund program, to help ensure fit with their strategic plans.

It was also suggested that pilot projects might be a better use of money than ongoing funding through EPO grants (although one group argued that the focus should be on transferring knowledge about what teaching approaches work, before developing new ones). As well, EPO funding is sometimes provided at a point in the provincial fiscal cycle, which ends March 31, that creates challenges for boards, with their August 31 year-end; and there is frustration that EPO funding is sometimes cut after a board has devoted resources to the project and the community has come to expect it to continue.

It was suggested that the Ministry should use information reported by boards to assess EPO effectiveness, including which EPO grants to keep and whether new ones are needed, and also that more EPO funding should go into the Grants for Student Needs (GSN).

The design and purpose of EPO grants were also discussed. One complaint was that having so many different programs requiring staff to go for training created confusion and actually distracted them from the core business of teaching.

Professional development (PD) was a particular instance of EPO funding that drew suggestions around both when and how it should be delivered. It was recommended that a more strategic approach to training be explored by:

- Consolidating the number of PD days and have some in the summer;
- Increasing job-embedded PD, rather than separate sessions;
- Reducing the amount of PD to keep teachers in the classroom and avoid the disruption of having supply teachers; and
- Putting more control over delivery into the hands of teacher federations.

### **Improved accountability for targeted GSN funds**

Several contributors expressed their belief that education accountability falls within the exclusive jurisdiction of trustees. Furthermore, it was expressed that Ministry involvement in this jurisdiction restricts boards' ability to support strategic goals. The work associated with reporting and requesting funding was described as very time-consuming, and examples were cited of requirements that did not seem to promote efficiency or effectiveness.

The duplication of audit functions also drew widespread criticism. Being subject to internal, external and regional audits has created audit fatigue for boards. As well, external audit is seen as more objective. One view was that having the Ministry facilitate sharing and adoption of best practices across boards would be more useful.

### **Linking boards' performance more closely to reporting requirements**

There was a wide range of views as to how – or even whether – a board's performance should determine how much reporting it must do.

First, several parties noted that it is normal practise for boards to share more information when working with the Ministry to increase performance and meet the goals of their board improvement plans. There was general agreement with keeping and even expanding this approach, which focuses efforts on boards where risks to achievement were seen to be highest: "The Ministry ... should communicate to [problem] boards directly;" and "If kids are declining in EQAO scores, the Ministry should talk to the board. But this [practice] is not required" at present.

Second, if formal performance evaluation was to be used to determine required reporting, there was general (although not universal) concern about relying on the single measure of student achievement. Many felt there should be a range of indicators, and efficiency should be balanced with education community well-being. It was noted that a broader definition of what is meant by success for students may emerge from the Ministry's recent Great to Excellent consultations.

Some teacher representatives questioned the value of accountability frameworks generally: "What works is treating front-line workers with respect and letting them have autonomy – academics are moving away from the 'accountability at all costs' model," one representative said. It was also questioned whether funding for EQAO to measure student achievement might not be better spent on advancing student achievement.

### **Redesigning demographic-based grants**

A number of grants are based on demographic data, often drawn from the federal census, and are intended to support the needs of groups of students who may face particular challenges. Many participants agreed that the current approach could be improved. Census data were not felt to be up-to-date with movements in the population, especially given recent changes in how data are collected.

Participants pointed to other sources of more relevant data, such as data that boards themselves collect; EQAO quantitative and qualitative data on ethnicity, special needs, location and so on; Early Years Centres data (with parent permission); and voluntary and confidential personal self-identification.

Specific comments were directed at the demographic allocation of the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG), which reflects such factors as income level and whether the household is headed by a single parent. Principal representatives said LOG, and similar grants, should be allocated in collaboration with local leaders, as census data may miss pockets of poverty. Some criticized the latitude boards have in allocating this funding, saying that there needs to be more accountability and focus.

### **Protecting the most vulnerable**

Both parent representatives and special education advocates spoke of the need to protect funding for vulnerable learners, including students with special needs, Aboriginal students, students-at-risk and those living in poverty. One participant suggested tighter accountability as the way to achieve that end because "these people don't do the best in the battles for school board funding." Advocates and parents would also like more disaggregated board-level data to see more clearly how vulnerable groups are doing. They spoke to the value of a shared accountability model involving parents and Special Education Advisory Committees, with the caveat that the parents of vulnerable students often find it hardest to navigate the system.

There were concerns that special education funding was not being spent effectively. One participant stressed the need to look at evidence and ensure consistent use of the best approaches across the province. It was felt that programs for vulnerable groups were sometimes ended before enough evidence could be collected to evaluate them. Participants also expressed concern about trying to find efficiencies through alternative delivery models, because of the vulnerable nature of the students. Board representatives described special education as ripe for review, noting that supports need proper evaluation to determine effectiveness.

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### **Sharing savings**

There was widespread agreement that school boards should get back a share of any savings they achieve through efficiency and modernization initiatives. Over the years, boards have implemented efficiency measures and used the savings to meet local pressures or priorities. It was noted that barriers to improving efficiency included the voluntary nature of participation and the fact that while, in theory, boards kept internally achieved savings, the Ministry might target a funding reduction to an area in which boards were spending less.

In contrast, as a participant from a board noted, "Shared savings are easy to communicate to the community. ... We can say, if we close schools we can reinvest the savings ... to improve education for our kids." Administrators generally felt that boards should decide where to reinvest savings, as each situation would be different. Parents and students, however, felt that savings should go into improving programs and services and, in the case of closures, easing students' adaptation to their new school.

It is often the case, many noted, that achieving long-term savings requires up-front spending. One way of dealing with that might be to return a bigger share of savings to boards for the first few years, and increase the share of savings going to the Province in later years. Alternatively, the Province could provide boards with some of the up-front funding. Another option would be to have groups (which could include school boards, municipalities and/or other service providers) submit efficiency proposals to the Ministry. Approved proposals would get seed funding to aid in implementation, with the savings shared thereafter.

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## **E-books, e-learning and technology**

The discussions made it very clear that the use of e-learning approaches and digital technology, including e-books, is growing in Ontario's schools. While these developments have been in play for a number of years, both teachers and students identified the importance of providing balanced and varied learning opportunities and resources to address the diverse needs of Ontario's students. In particular, both students and teachers endorsed the critical importance of meaningful teacher-student interactions in the learning process.

It is not clear whether there are efficiencies to be gained and savings to be found in the areas of technology-enabled teaching and learning. Some participants felt that "there is a lot of low-hanging fruit," citing potential savings in purchases of paper, textbooks and photocopiers. Others, however, pointed to the substantial shift in teaching practice and digital access that this assumed: many teachers and students still print material provided electronically, either by personal preference or because of lack of broadband access. Publishers charge for textbooks and other resources delivered electronically, and there are costs for teacher training, technology and infrastructure to ensure electronic delivery.

### **E-learning opportunities**

Currently, students may take part in electronic learning through provincially licensed digital software and websites made available to all publicly-funded Ontario schools by the Ministry, in teacher-mediated virtual learning environments such as blended learning opportunities or e-learning courses supported by eLearning Ontario, or through fully online courses offered through the Independent Learning Centre (ILC). Numerous participants, including teachers, cautioned that the goal of using virtual learning environments, online courses and digital tools should be to improve student learning outcomes, rather than to save costs. To that end, they need to be selected carefully and used effectively.

A number of participants could see the value of fully online courses or distance education for students in some circumstances, although many across the sector spoke of the benefits of blended learning, which all teachers can access. Blended learning occurs in a face-to-face class that happens at a specific place and time. It combines the support of classroom learning with the flexibility of e-learning and can be used regularly or intermittently by teachers, based on the needs of their students. Blended learning does not affect class sizes; collective agreements do not recognize differences in the method of delivery of instruction as a determinate of class size.

Some students who had completed distance education on-line courses and teacher-mediated e-learning courses found them challenging, but felt that the need for self-motivation and self-discipline was good preparation for post-secondary study. A few participants supported the idea of making at least one course taken online or through a virtual learning environment mandatory as part of the high-school curriculum, as is done in several U.S. states, but a number felt online or e-learning courses or methods of delivery were not appropriate to address the learning needs of every student.

### **E-books may be beneficial, but access is key**

There was wide interest in the idea of using electronic versions of traditional textbooks. A student commented that "if you sat 100 students down and asked would they prefer an e-book or a traditional text, 96 or 97 would choose the e-book." But access to the required technology is critical, every group noted. This can be a challenge for both students and schools. One person talked about teachers having to print out e-book content to distribute to students because of lack of broadband capacity. Even if the school has broadband, many students lack it at home. There was some support for bring-your-own-device (BYOD) policies, especially from boards that don't have the resources to provide newer technologies themselves, but also concerns because not all students or educators have devices and not all areas of the province have sufficient infrastructure to support expanded use of technology.

### **Addressing equity**

Equity of access to technology was seen as important. Participants mentioned several measures that in their view would help move toward this:

- Use cloud technology to support equity/fair access;
- Have hardware available in libraries or rent laptops for students who cannot afford them;
- Support access through more robust broadband infrastructure (see "Other ideas");
- Consider posting links from a website instead of requiring specific technology to access materials.

There were numerous suggestions about how to make better use of technology:

- Build knowledge at the school level ("if there isn't a tech-savvy person in the school, you won't get the best stuff," one participant warned);

- Encourage more collaboration among teachers and create a province-wide website for sharing teachers' and boards' tech tips;
- Have students submit assignments on-line as a way of getting them and their teachers accustomed to using the internet for schoolwork; and
- Provide not just hardware and software, but training and adequate IT support.

Participants made the point that the greatest challenge may be creating a baseline level of comfort among teachers. As a student said, "The question is changing from 'are we preparing the students properly?' to 'are we preparing the teachers properly?' It's a huge shift."

Equity is an issue for students with special education needs and the programs offered to support these students:

- Everyone supporting the student should have access to the same information on how to use the technology properly (parents, EAs, teachers), including training;
- Choices should be driven by evidence and the same approaches used across boards;
- Not all boards can afford to do the research, so more provincial licencing of such materials as software would be good; and
- To the extent possible, students with special education needs should also be able to access technological supports consistently as they move from elementary to secondary to post-secondary learning.

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## Getting the balance right

One key question is where the balance between the Ministry and boards should lie in making decisions around savings. There was some consensus that provincially-mandated efficiency strategies may take several years to get results, and that as an interim step a bottom-up approach driven by boards would be the best way to find short-term savings. For the longer term, however, it was felt that the Ministry must develop and share an up-front strategy so that boards could adjust and prepare.

Some were concerned about allowing school boards freedom even in the short term, because "the situation on the ground is so politically fraught." There was felt to be wide divergence among boards in their commitment to engage all interested parties in discussion and decisions.

Several parties stressed the need for any efficiency and modernization measures to link to an over-all strategy on student achievement and well-being. The hope was expressed that the results of the current Great to Excellent initiative, for example, would tie to this exercise. As a parent put it, "The dialogue will help government understand the different lenses, whether of students, parents, or others, that may help decide the balance. It should also help create better understanding of what student success should really be, and where funding needs to go."

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## Other ideas

### Developing an integrated broadband approach

To improve access to broadband across Ontario, especially in remote/rural areas, many participants identified a role for the Province for several reasons, including cost and scope: while a centralized solution might involve major investment, it would likely be less costly and more efficient than individual efforts; and because broadband is more than just a school board concern, solutions should incorporate community, health-care and other users.

### Increasing buying power

Many participants felt that there were savings to be found in a more coordinated procurement process, as larger-scale buying would allow better pricing and reduce duplication of efforts. Ways of ensuring wider use of the Ontario Education Collaborative Marketplace, a current buying consortium, were suggested.

Where technology is concerned, in addition to the role in broadband discussed above, many felt the Ministry should also be involved in researching solutions and vendors for boards and schools to create consistency and reduce costs. That research role might also be helpful in looking at the time value of investments in technology, given how fast it changes.

### Bringing together back offices

Many board representatives suggested rationalizing common administrative functions like human resource, payroll and student performance assessment systems across the different board systems by using emerging cloud technology.

In addition to providing savings themselves, consistent systems would allow boards to collaborate more easily on other efficiency and modernization initiatives. As well, making systems consistent could ensure they included more comprehensive and useful information.

While there could be substantial savings and efficiencies in the long run, it was recognized that this direction would involve considerable investment up-front, and that adoption across 72 boards might be problematic, especially since boards have already invested heavily in systems themselves. For this reason, an approach that allowed boards to join a collective system as their own systems became outdated might be preferable.

It was also pointed out that managing technology contracts is very sophisticated now, and many boards, especially the smaller ones, don't always have the capacity to deal with this. Similarly, a joint human resources/legal team might be more cost-effective for managing collective agreements. Banking services, the finance and internal audit functions, use of consultants and other service providers were raised as other areas for a shared services approach.

### **Getting the most from consortia**

Board representatives felt the formation of consortia can be very successful, especially if organized on regional lines. The key appeared to be ensuring the same level of service and mutual benefits. This is somewhat problematic, however, with some feeling that consortia tend to be of more benefit to small boards and that large boards would resist, as a result. Once a consortium was formed, there would need to be a way to ensure that the priorities of the individual boards were addressed in an equitable fashion.

### **Managing buildings and transportation more efficiently**

It was suggested that the Province might handle both transportation and facilities management, including the building of new schools, as these were areas on which boards spend a great deal of time and resources. Another option would be more regional oversight of these activities, but a mechanism for ensuring participation would be needed.

### **Saving money on the ground**

There were several suggestions about "on-the-ground" changes that would save boards money:

- Hold more board meetings by videoconference;
- Look at ways of reducing Workplace Safety and Insurance Board costs through violence reduction, better workplace practices and free training offered by health and safety organizations;
- Streamline training requirements around new initiatives;
- Use more alternative delivery mechanisms, for example one board being able to charge others to use its printing facility;
- Use custodial staff, instead of outside licenced tradespeople, for simple maintenance tasks like testing fire alarm systems (after the appropriate training, where needed); and
- Adopt better interfaces for reporting, aggregating and summarizing ministry data.

The sharing of best practices in many areas was a repeated suggestion; as one participant noted, "People love hearing information about what is going well in various school boards and taking it home and seeing if they can sell it." Concerns were expressed, however, that the current environment for labour relations gets in the way of such discussions. The report of the School Operations Working Group was also cited as a potential source of further efficiency ideas, although it was felt it could use more concrete examples and approaches.

### **Learning from others**

There were suggestions for learning from other sectors and/or jurisdictions:

- Using evidence and discussions from the health care sector to help determine the correct alignment of human resources, for example educational assistants;
- The "lean" management model that has moved from manufacturing into services, including health, might be put to use in Ontario's public education system;
- Use examples of what other ministries have done successfully with their partners; and
- Look at Alberta's Supernet broadband model, in which schools participate.

### **The bigger picture**

Several comments touched on overarching issues:

- Linking efficiency and modernization to other recent reviews as their recommendations are implemented, including integrating the functions of all ministries involved in the sector;
- Making staff healthcare and other benefit programs provincial; and
- Helping to ensure lower building operating costs and design consistency through a stronger role for the Ministry in capital evaluation and planning.

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## **Conclusion**

While the discussions brought forth diverse views, they consistently highlighted three areas where the Ministry could focus its efforts: more efficient use of resources, in particular school space; a more integrated approach to technology; and a simpler, clearer accountability relationship.

- Both large and small schools can effectively foster student success and well-being. Larger schools and schools of any size in which space is used, rather than empty, are less costly to operate. It thus makes sense, especially when resources are scarce, to encourage more efficient use of school space in Ontario, whether through sharing space with community partners or other boards or through consolidating schools within one board. This must, however, be done thoughtfully and with a recognition that solutions should put the needs of students and communities first.
- Numerous participants spoke of the critical need for a coordinated and large-scale approach to broadband access and the related need for in-school support for the adoption of new technologies. This is an issue of special importance in rural and remote areas without affordable broadband access and for boards that face challenges in making the needed up-front investments in their schools and administration offices to take full advantage of digital opportunities.
- Participants looked to the Ministry and the Great to Excellent initiative to set out what a successful education system should look like in Ontario and to generate definitions for student success and well-being that could ultimately help define and align system roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities. As well, there was a strong sense that the Ministry needs to address initiative overload and related reporting requirements, while continuing to ensure accountability.

Participants highlighted a wide range of areas, including coordinating and improving business practices and information systems, sharing best practices, bringing other ministries into this discussion, better leveraging the Province's capital analysis capacity, and streamlining Ministry activities and structure, where cost savings could be found without compromising the core educational mission of the sector (and, in some cases, while enhancing it).

The Ministry recognizes the importance of continuing the conversation that these consultations opened, as well as taking the immediate action required by the fiscal situation. The need to continually look for greater efficiencies, while also considering new ways to invest, is a challenge that can be solved only by working together.