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Federation of
**ONTARIO
PUBLIC
LIBRARIES**

Supporting Ontario's Public & School Libraries to Empower Local Communities

Ontario Library Association & Federation of Ontario Public Libraries 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission

Public libraries are critical to communities across Ontario and essential to thriving local economies and economic growth.

- Public libraries are Ontario's farthest-reaching, most cost-effective public resource. They are engines of innovation, entrepreneurship, and local economic development in communities of all sizes.

- Millions of Ontarians rely on local public libraries in their communities: to work, to learn, to connect to community and government services, and to find or train for a job.

- Despite this, many individuals and families across the province are unable to access the local public library resources they need.

- In urban centres, rural and Northern communities alike, public library budgets are overstretched – and the situation is getting worse.

- The combined impact of the pandemic, the pressure of inflation on public library and municipal budgets, and growing social and economic challenges in communities across the province have brought public libraries to a critical point.

Building on Ontario's Investment in Public Libraries

Over the past several years, OLA & FOPL have worked successfully with the Ontario Government to secure vital support for Ontario's public libraries.

- Through the 2024 Ontario Budget, $1.25 million in enhanced, ongoing provincial funding to support the operations and staffing of First Nations Public Libraries on reserve.

- $582,000 investment for up to 155 eligible public libraries in small, rural and First Nation communities to provide internet access.

- $4.8 million investment to install or upgrade high-speed broadband internet at over 100 public libraries across Ontario

Priorities Overview

Public Libraries

- Provide critical e-learning support and fair access to modern, digital resources for all Ontario public libraries through **the creation of an Ontario Digital Public Library,** leveraging the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a universal set of high- quality e-learning & online resources through their local public library.

- **Increase provincial operating funding for Ontario's public libraries** to address critical shared priorities and community needs.

- Building upon the enhanced funding committed in the 2024 Ontario Budget, **develop a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve** to ensure that these important local hubs are fully funded and viable.

School Libraries

- **Restore and enhance protection of provincial funding for school libraries and library staff** under the new Core Education Funding Model, as well as accountability for school boards about how these funds are used, in recognition of their importance for meeting Ontario's student literacy goals and supporting student achievement.

Public Library Priorities

Provide critical e-learning support and equitable access to modern, digital resources for all Ontario public libraries through the creation of an Ontario Digital Public Library, leveraging the province's significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a universal set of high-quality e-learning & online resources through their local public library.

- Ontario's public libraries are essential to equitable, reliable access to broadband internet and computers. They are especially vital for many First Nation, rural and Northern communities where at home connectivity is limited, and for hundreds of thousands of Ontarians that cannot afford in-home internet services.

- The Ontario Government has already recognized the crucial importance of public libraries to broadband connectivity and equity of access:

  o in *Building a Digital Ontario,* making a $4.8 million investment to install or upgrade broadband connectivity at more than 100 public libraries across the province; and

  o in February 2024, the Ontario Government invested an additional $122,000 to the *Internet Connectivity Grant* enabling up to 155 eligible public libraries that serve communities of 20,000 or less to be fully reimbursed for the costs of providing publicly accessible internet access.

- Building on that critical foundation, it is the right time to take the next step to empower Ontarians with the online resources they need to succeed – no matter where they live in Ontario.

- In particular, people rely on local public libraries for access to digital and online resources, which contribute to student success and life-long learning, as well as towards entrepreneurship and job readiness. These include:

  o in-depth job and career skills training;

  o language learning;

  o live tutoring and homework help;

  o health information; and

  o resources to support vulnerable residents, such as seniors and adults living with developmental disabilities.

A proposed Ontario Digital Public Library would provide a core suite of highly impactful digital resources accessible by every Ontarian through their local public library. While the specific resource set will depend on the outcome of competitive negotiations with vendors, potential resources could include:

- **Live Tutoring;** resources are available that provide a powerful suite of live tutoring, skills development and test preparation tools for learners of all ages, with a focus on K-12.

- **Job Skill Development and Training;** some libraries already subscribe to databases that include an ever-expanding catalogue of virtual courses and learning modules for career, creative, digital skills development and certifications

- **Language Learning;** these apps have become increasingly popular, providing highly personalized and comprehensive language learning capabilities for dozens of global languages.

- However, **these resources are expensive, especially when purchased on a patchwork, library-by-library basis** – and a diverse set of the highest impact resources is well beyond the means of an individual or family to afford. Many public libraries in Ontario, particularly in smaller and First Nation communities, struggle to pay for or are unable to afford these high-quality resources.

- People living in communities of less than 5,000 have access to less than a third of the online resources as those living in Toronto – despite accessing them twice as often per capita as people in large urban communities.

Recommended Priority:

- By following the well-established approach used in Alberta and Saskatchewan and leveraging volume purchasing through an annual provincial investment, as well as existing public library infrastructure, the Ontario Digital Public Library could provide a universal set of the highest-impact digital resources to every public library – and every Ontarian – **at an overall cost savings of up to 40%** when compared to library-by-library subscription.

- Addressing this digital divide – through both broadband connectivity and the high-impact resources to match – is how public libraries are at the forefront of fulfilling Ontario's vision of an economy where every individual and community can contribute and compete.

- *Projected cost:* $10 million - $20 million / annually.[1]

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Critical Digital Resources are Out-of-Reach for Many Ontarians and Public Libraries

- According to the 2023 Annual Survey of Public Libraries, only 145 of our 363 library systems are able to afford subscriptions to five (5) or more databases.

- Meanwhile, 69 public libraries reported having zero (0) database subscriptions; majority of which are public libraries on reserve.

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1   See Appendix for provincial investment scenarios based on different funding levels.

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How Would an Ontario Digital Public Library Work?

- Based on an annual provincial investment, Ontario's public library sector would work closely with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming and agency partners to determine the appropriate mix of resources to deliver the greatest impact across the province.

- The designated delivery partner – such as the Ontario Library Service or another identified entity – would negotiate to secure province-wide access to a universal set of resources.

- Access to these resources will ideally be connected directly through local public library websites, providing a seamless experience for local users.

- Ontarians will be able to access the complete resource set either in-person at their local library, from home, or through their personal devices wherever they are.

- For those public libraries without an online presence, the Ontario Digital Public Library will maintain a direct online portal to provide access.

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Increase provincial funding for Ontario's public libraries to address critical shared priorities and community needs.

- Public libraries in Ontario have received no increase in provincial funding support (Provincial Libraries Operating Grant, or PLOG) in over 25 years, during which time the value of the province's investment in public libraries has decreased by over 60%.

- Although over 90% of public library funding is provided by the local municipal government, provincial operating funding provides critical stability to public library budgets.

- Libraries have adapted and maximized the impact of every dollar despite inflation, substantial changes in technology, and the increasing importance of libraries as a vital community hub and public resource.

- Across Ontario – in communities of all sizes – these **budget pressures are reaching a tipping point.**

- Public libraries are the focal point of municipalities across Ontario; critical to social cohesion and community building. As a result, they find themselves on the front lines of many of the most critical challenges facing our communities, including homelessness, mental health and addictions, newcomer integration, re-skilling in a changing economy, and overcoming the digital divide.

- Ontario's public libraries are proposing a targeted investment in additional operating funding for public libraries **to specifically address critical areas of shared community and provincial priority,** including:
    - o Supporting economic recovery through job training and skills development;
    - o Addressing the community impacts of mental health and addictions;

- o Providing services and resources to assist with high-needs members of the community such as seniors, newcomers, working families and all vulnerable members; and
  - o Supporting early literacy and K-12 success.

- This investment, which would be in addition to and separate from existing provincial operating funding under the PLOG, would be shared across hundreds of Ontario libraries to provide predictable, flexible funding for local public libraries to respond to these critical areas of focus based on the needs of the people and the local communities they serve.

- This funding could be utilized to support ongoing operations, programming, resources, or front-line staffing specifically targeted to the four identified priority areas based on community need.

- The proposed level of investment corresponds to a restoration of the present value of the Ontario Government's support for Ontario's public libraries, addressing the impact of inflation, rising costs and other pressures over more than two decades.

- In conjunction with this investment, the Ontario Government and Ontario's public libraries would work alongside municipalities to ensure that this critical investment builds upon and enhances existing municipal support for public library budgets.

- *Projected cost:* $25 million / annually.

Building upon the enhanced funding committed in the 2024 Ontario Budget, develop a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve to ensure that these important local hubs are fully funded and viable.

- Public libraries on reserve serve as an accessible gathering place and information sharing resource for First Nations communities. They are deeply important to maintaining a sense of community and to minimizing social isolation, many of which are remote or face systemic social and economic challenges.

- Furthermore, public libraries on reserve perform a unique role in the preservation of their communities' memory, archiving photos and historical information, and in revitalizing First Nations languages through cultural resources, language learning programming, storytelling events, and craft groups.

- Public libraries on reserve are chronically under-funded. The municipal tax revenue used to support most public libraries does not exist for public libraries in First Nation communities.

- There is little to no funding available for collections, programming and technology resources. Librarians rely on one-time grants or donations to develop their collections, and many librarians contribute personally to purchase programming supplies and food.

- Many public libraries on reserve operate with only one staff person who is expected to perform many functions. Public libraries on reserve need additional funding to provide staff with a living wage and to increase staffing levels so that they can meet their communities' needs for library programs and services.

- Of the 133 First Nations communities in Ontario, only 37 have public libraries. The number has steadily dropped in recent years and the pandemic has only made this situation worse, with four public libraries on reserve closing their doors due to inadequate funding over the past 20 months.

- In recognition of the significant financial barriers faced by First Nations Public Libraries on reserve, **the Ontario Government made a multi-million-dollar enhancement through the 2024 Ontario Budget** to both the First Nation Salary Supplement and Public Library Operating Grant funding. This investment amounted to $1.25 million in additional, ongoing annual funding.

- This critical investment is a vital first step to restoring stability to First Nations Public Libraries on-reserve.

- There is more important work to be done. Together with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming and First Nations Public Library leaders, this recent investment provides an opportunity to work together on a sustainable funding and operating model to preserve the long-term viability of these important local hubs.

Recommended Priority:

- Work alongside First Nations Public Library leaders towards the design and implementation of a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve to ensure that these important local hubs are fully-funded and viable.

- *Projected cost:* N/A; projected funding requirements would be based on the identified model and requirements.

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School Library Priorities

Restore and enhance protection of provincial funding for school libraries and library staff under the new Core Education Funding Model, as well as accountability for school boards about how these funds are used, in recognition of their importance for meeting Ontario's student literacy goals and supporting student achievement.

- Ontario's Ministry of Education has embarked upon a "back to basics" strategy with a commitment to boosting student literacy and math skills.

- This reflects ongoing trends indicating that fewer and fewer Ontario students are meeting the provincial standard in reading and writing. Last year's Grade 3 and Grade 6 EQAO scores indicated a further decrease in reading and writing scores.

- Access to school libraries is a proven part of student success, especially in literacy.

- School libraries are at the heart of student literacy achievement. Literacy and critical research skills are foundational to student success in STEM and other key subject areas. Teacher-librarians serve as literacy leaders and provide support and expertise while working alongside classroom teachers to meet literacy and curriculum objectives.

- Despite the importance of school libraries and staff to achieving Ontario's literacy objectives, student access to school libraries has significantly declined over the past 20 years.

> **Ontario's School Libraries and Student Literacy are At Risk**
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> - Closure of school libraries and reductions/eliminations in library staff for 20+ years
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> - 1 out of 3 of school boards reported underfunding school libraries and library staff in 2021-22
>
> - Loss of enveloped funding & reporting measures via Core Education Funding
>
> - 2023-24 EQAO results show decrease in number of students meeting provincial standard for reading & writing

- Due to school board-level decisions, **hundreds of thousands of students across Ontario have lost access to school libraries and the critical resources and support they provide**. This has accelerated in the past several years as several of Ontario's largest school boards have made dramatic reductions to school libraries and library staff; other school boards in both urban and rural communities have eliminated them altogether.

- According to reporting by school boards to the Ministry of Education, 1 in 3 school boards in Ontario self-reported underfunding school libraries for the 2021-22 school year – a number that has likely increased since then.

- Ontario's Core Education Funding Model, introduced last spring, is putting school libraries at further immediate risk. The new model:
  - Eliminated protected funding for school libraries and library staff.
  - Put library staff funding in the same category as materials like Chromebooks and crayons.
  - School boards are no longer required to report to the Ministry of Education on how or if they are funding school libraries – a requirement previously introduced by the Ontario Government in 2021.

Recommended Priorities

- Update the Core Education Funding Model to create a defined sub-allocation for all school libraries and staffing funding, consistent with the provincial per-student formula;

- Update the Funding Model to fully protect these allocations; and

- Restore the annual reporting and accountability requirements regarding school libraries for school boards and implement recommended enhancements previously submitted by the OSLA.

Ontario Library Association / Federation of Ontario Public Libraries

The Ontario Library Association (OLA) is the oldest continually-operating non-profit library association in Canada, with over 3,500 members comprised of library staff and supporters from public, school, academic, and special libraries.

The Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) represents 237 public library systems in Ontario, including 39 Public Libraries on Reserves.

Together, OLA & FOPL are committed to ensuring that libraries can continue to play a critical role in the social, education, cultural and economic success of our communities and schools.

Appendix

ODPL – Provincial Investment Scenarios

- Different funding levels listed below provide incremental increases for access to online databases and e-learning products, based on library sector understanding of preferred/high-use resources, current subscription costs, and required technical support and maintenance.
- Each funding level provides all 310 public library systems and First Nations public libraries in Ontario with:
  - o A suite of online resources for a full subscription year with unlimited, 24/7 and simultaneous access, and
  - o Annual operating costs for staff, support and supplies.
- At each funding level, the breadth of resources provided substantially increases, while operating costs remain stable.
- The ODPL would be delivered seamlessly through local public library websites, with centralized support to coordinate and manage resources and operations.

Funding Level*	Number of Databases	Database Examples**
$10 million	14	General: • *Health and Small Business reference* • *Language learning* • *Consumer Reports* • *Legal forms and templates* • *Magazines and News in 70 languages* • *French e-books* • *Auto Repair* • *Genealogy* • *Self Publishing*
$15 million (recommended)	18	General and Advanced – all content listed above and: • *K-12 e-content* • *Live Tutoring* • *Resume and Job coaching*
$20 million	22	General, Advanced and Specialized - all content listed above and: • *Online learning courses, including business essentials* • *Wellness and personal development*

* The three funding levels include funds for online databases as well as $780,000 for operational requirements including supplies, support materials and 5 full-time staff for training, technical support, outreach and digital content management for the ODPL.

** At the levels of investment outlined in the scenarios above, OLA/FOPL is not recommending that further investment in e-books be included in the ODPL due to borrowing limits/restrictions, and high purchasing costs. The funding would be more impactful and beneficial to a greater number of Ontarians when expended on online databases and e-learning resources.