

# Supporting the Recovery of Ontario's Public Libraries & Communities from COVID-19

## 2021 Pre-Budget Submission February 2021

### **COVID-19 has demonstrated the critical importance of public & school libraries to their communities across Ontario**

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

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario's public libraries have worked tirelessly to meet the evolving and rapidly changing needs of the people they serve, and in strict accordance with Ontario's emergency public health guidelines.

School libraries have likewise demonstrated their critical importance to successful online learning, helping to ensure students achieve curriculum objectives, and curating the digital and print resources students need to succeed. During the early months of the pandemic, teacher-librarians and school library professionals assumed a key role in providing leadership to help students, teachers and parents adapt to distance learning.

The Ontario Government has recognized the important local role of libraries and their continuing importance in bridging the digital divide. On February 4<sup>th</sup>, the province announced a \$4.8 million investment to upgrade broadband in up to 50 public libraries in unserved and underserved communities. This game-changing investment recognizes the essential role of public libraries as community digital hubs, and offers a tremendous foundation to ensure that all Ontarians in communities across the province can access the high-speed broadband they need to succeed.

### **Libraries are an essential part of Ontario's COVID-19 recovery – but many who depend on libraries are still falling through the gaps**

Almost a year after the outbreak of the pandemic, public and school libraries continue to balance their commitment to meeting the needs of the people and students they serve while maintaining health and safety.

Unfortunately, many people and students across Ontario are falling through the gaps amidst the challenges of the pandemic. Individuals and families across the province are struggling and unable to access the public library resources they need. Many of these gaps existed prior to the pandemic, but the ongoing health emergency has brought them to a critical point. These pressures, especially the demand for limited e-resources and other barriers to fair access, are most acute in small, rural, Northern and First Nations communities, as well as for low-income residents across Ontario.

The pandemic has also been particularly difficult for students, and devastating for the school libraries they depend on. As part of their back-to-school plans, many school boards across Ontario eliminated the role of teacher-librarians and school library professionals board-wide at either the elementary and/or secondary level, and with them access to school library programming and in-person school library resources. Although some access to virtual library resources may still be available, without the support of teacher-librarians and school library professionals, it is extremely difficult for teachers and students to use these resources effectively.

Most concerning is the experience of the past two decades in Ontario, which has shown that when school libraries are closed and school library professionals eliminated, libraries do not come back and students pay the price.

### **Addressing these priority issues will deliver rapid benefits and support the COVID-19 recovery efforts across the province**

Through carefully targeted investments, the Ontario Government can make sure that all Ontarians – no matter where they live or learn – will continue to have access to much-needed modern, cost-effective resources and services through their local public and school libraries, during and beyond the pandemic emergency.

- **A targeted enhancement of provincial funding through the Public Libraries Operating Grant (PLOG)** to offset lost revenues from implementing fines-free policies and help public libraries make these policies permanent. This investment would help to break down barriers to access for low-income Ontarians.
- **Subject to the above increase, maintain provincial funding for Ontario’s public libraries at current levels** and work with municipalities to prevent unsustainable cuts to public library funding.
- Provide critical e-learning support and fair access to modern, digital resources for all Ontario public libraries through **a \$4.7 million annual investment to support the establishment of an Ontario Digital Public Library**, thereby leveraging the province’s significant purchasing power to give all Ontarians access to a common set of high-quality e-learning & online resources and more e-books.
- In consultation with school boards and library professionals, **update the implementation of Ontario’s education funding formula to ensure that funding for school libraries is protected**. This funding is crucial to ensuring that school libraries continue to be a foundational part of the government’s vision for student success.
- **In consultation with the sector, work together to establish a working group to develop a provincial strategy for school library e-resources** to ensure that all students in Ontario benefit from a level playing field for success.

---

### **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 5,000 members comprised of library staff and supporters from public, school, academic, and special libraries.

The **Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL)** represents 246 public library systems in Ontario, including 45 First Nations public libraries, in communities throughout the Province.

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.