

Sent, August 30, 2021 to all Ontario Directors of Education and School Board Trustee Chairs.

RE: Including Library Learning Commons in 2021-22 Return to School Protocols

The Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) is a recognized subject matter association, consisting of more than 1,000 front-line teacher-librarians and school library staff, who are essential for delivering Ontario's primary and secondary curriculum. Throughout the ongoing pandemic, we have shared with you the tremendous positive impact of school libraries and library staff on student achievement, and the urgent need to ensure that students in your board continue to have access to these learning supports.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on school libraries, staff and programming during the 2020-21 school year, with corresponding consequences for many students that rely on the library learning commons.

Decades of evidence demonstrate the relationship between academic achievement and access to a school library. The library learning commons helps reduce barriers to student achievement. Students from families with fewer resources, including many from racialized and marginalized communities, rely on school libraries to help their children succeed as students. There are models for maintaining a robust school library program, even as schools and school boards must respond to urgent health and safety priorities.

As we rapidly approach the 2021-2022 school year, the Ministry of Education has issued [guidelines and health and safety measures](#) for all schools to support safe in-person learning for students and staff. These recommendations can and must be applied to the library learning commons as well, ensuring that students can safely access these critical supports without barriers:

Shared Spaces: "Students can use shared spaces with appropriate indoor gathering measures and physical distancing in place between cohorts. Shared spaces can include libraries, computer or tech labs, lockers, gymnasiums and change rooms."

Ventilation: "using standalone HEPA filter units to ensure adequate ventilation in all occupied classrooms and other school spaces, like cafeterias, gyms, libraries and music rooms, including junior and senior kindergarten classrooms in schools with mechanical ventilation"

Books and computers: "Shared materials: Students can share materials during recess, within shared spaces and indoors with appropriate physical distancing measures, regular hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette. This includes sharing computers, art supplies, books, indoor physical education equipment, and learning and play-based materials."

In addition, the Ministry of Education has further recognized the foundational role of the library learning commons in the 2021-22 Grants for Student Needs. The updated GSN (available [here](#)) includes an important new reporting requirement intended to provide the Ministry with greater insight into how school boards are funding the library learning commons. Furthermore, per the guidance issued by the Ministry of Education, "school

boards that are not fully utilizing the funding provided for library staffing through the Pupil Foundation Grant, along with the existing enveloping provision of the Library Staff Allocation, will be asked for a multi-year plan highlighting their vision and next steps to address any underspending in this area.”

We believe that these new accountability measures will have a substantial positive impact on student success, literacy and post-secondary preparedness in every community across Ontario.

In your back-to-school plan, we urge you to ensure that you have incorporated clear policies and guidelines to enable safe access to and use of the school library learning commons by all students, educators and staff. We recognize that the year ahead will remain a challenging transition as we continue to adapt to the uncertainty of the pandemic, and that school library programming will vary based on the advice of local public health units across the province. Nevertheless, we remain steadfast that access to the library learning commons and its supporting resources and staff are essential to student success.

OSLA shares your commitment to ensuring that Ontario students receive a world-class education. We would welcome the opportunity to work with you and members of your team to ensure that students in your board will have access to this critical learning resource.

Sincerely,

Maureen McGrath, president of the Ontario School Library Association, on behalf OSLA Council 2021