

May 8th, 2023

Standing Committee on Social Policy
MPP Brian Riddell, Chair
Whitney Block, Room 1405
Toronto, ON M7A 1A2

Submitted via email to: scsp@ola.org

RE: Submission of the Ontario Library Association (OLA) and the Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) regarding Bill 98, *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, 2023*

On behalf of Ontario's school libraries and school library professionals, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) and the Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) welcome the opportunity to provide this submission to the Standing Committee on Social Policy as the committee considers Bill 98, the *Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, 2023* (Bill 98).

Together, OLA and OSLA represent thousands of Teacher-Librarians and school library professionals across Ontario. It is from this perspective, as specialized educators and literacy leaders in Ontario's elementary and secondary schools, that we highlight the role that our members fulfill in ensuring that all students and educators in Ontario have the support and resources needed to successfully build critical literacy skills.

We share the Ontario Government's commitment to prioritizing student achievement in literacy. We believe that through the implementation of the measures outlined in Bill 98 and the proposed accompanying investments, there is a vital opportunity to build upon the Ontario Government's recent actions recognizing the importance of school libraries to student success and work together as partners to achieve Ontario's student achievement goals.

Summary of Recommendations

- Through regulation and policy, clearly define the integral role of school libraries and teacher librarians for achieving provincial priorities in literacy and reading;
- Likewise, integrate the Ministry of Education's existing, enhanced reporting requirements for school library funding into any enhanced framework for school board financial reporting and transparency; and
- As part of the Ministry of Education's commitment to hire 700 specialized literacy educators, require that school boards prioritize the hiring of qualified teacher librarians if the board does not currently achieve the level of investment in school library staff set out by the provincial per student funding formula.

School Library Professionals are Ontario's Literacy Leaders

Minister of Education Stephen Lecce clearly stated the Ontario Government's objective through the introduction of Bill 98: "*refocus Ontario's education system on what really matters: strengthening reading, writing and math skills*".

OLA and OSLA strongly believe that successfully meeting and/or exceeding Ontario's literacy and student achievement goals must fully leverage and incorporate school libraries as a core literacy-supporting resource in Ontario schools. Tried, tested and proven over generations, school libraries and Teacher-Librarians are core to student success in literacy and reading.

OSLA's response to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's consultation for *Right to Read*¹, its report on student literacy in Ontario, highlighted research that:

- Confirms that Teacher-Librarians are literacy leaders and provide support and expertise to the entire school – both students and classroom teachers alike;
- Teacher-Librarians gauge reading abilities, interests and capabilities of the student population and can work in tandem with other staff with expertise in literacy and reading ability;
- School libraries, especially at the elementary level, foster student's love of reading, which research has shown has a positive impact on literacy scores, success across all curricular areas, including science, and students' social and civic engagement; and
- In addition, research shows that schools with trained Teacher-Librarians and school library professionals have better outcomes on the Grade 3 and 6 EQAO assessments.

These are measurable, demonstrable impacts. Well-resourced school libraries, staffed by skilled Teacher-Librarians partnering with other school library professionals, provide a dynamic, responsive, and adaptive resource focused on building student literacy and research skills at every grade level. Moreover, Teacher-Librarians provide a critical resource for classroom teachers, working collaboratively to equip and prepare these educators to deliver on curriculum objectives.

Ontario's School Libraries are at Immediate – and Increasing – Risk

Ontario parents think of school libraries and school library professionals as a pivotal part of a child's education and part of the fabric of the school learning environment. Many would be shocked to learn that over the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of Ontario students – including entire school boards in large Ontario municipalities – have lost access to fully-staffed school libraries with trained Teacher-Librarians. The recent pandemic experience has only deepened and accelerated this alarming trend, with many of Ontario's largest school boards, including several in Toronto and the GTA, reducing access to school libraries, redeploying Teacher-Librarians and laying off school library professionals. Moreover, while some school boards have reduced school library staffing and access, others have completely eliminated the role of Teacher-Librarian and library programming from their schools.

Experience has consistently demonstrated that when these important resources are lost, they are rarely restored, with resulting negative impacts for student achievement on core learning skills like literacy. In addition to the previously mentioned impact on Grade 3 and 6 EQAO assessment results, over the same twenty years, Ontario has experienced a steep decline in the percentage of children who report that they enjoy reading – a key metric for literacy outcomes – from 76% in

¹ [OHRC launches Right to Read public inquiry](#), OLA/OSLA and Canadian School Libraries (CSL), 2020.

1997 to 47% in 2018. This closely aligns with the loss of Teacher-Librarians over this period², with profound effects on literacy and student success.

The Ontario Government Recognizes the Critical Role of School Libraries

School libraries are a recognized priority of Ontario's Ministry of Education, which describes them as a key element of "*a classroom education that [is] required by, and generally common to, all students*" ([Ministry of Education Funding Technical Paper, 2018-19](#)). The Ministry of Education allocates funding for the staffing of elementary school libraries through the Grants for Student Needs (GSN), according to a per student funding formula. However, how most of these funds are used is left to the discretion of school boards, with the result being an inconsistent experience for students across Ontario, and a significant number of school boards spending less – or far less – on these critical resources than indicated by the funding formula.

OLA and OSLA are encouraged by recognition of the need for change before it is too late. For the first time in decades, the Ministry of Education under the leadership of Minister Lecce, acted to confront the steady erosion of access to school libraries and library-based resources across the province. Announced as part of the 2021-22 Grants for Student Needs, school boards were advised of the introduction of new, enhanced reporting requirements for school library funding. This additional reporting is intended to provide the Ministry of Education with more insight into how school boards are allocating funding in adherence to the provincial funding formula for school libraries, and those boards that are not fully utilizing the funding are asked to prepare and submit a multi-year plan highlighting their vision and next steps to address any underspending.

In recent discussions with Ministry of Education officials, OLA and OSLA have learned that all Ontario school boards have completed the first iteration of this reporting as of earlier this year. This includes those boards required to submit multi-year plans as a result of not currently meeting the provincial funding formula.

Recommendation: Ontario Can Act Now to Deliver Literacy Success and Protect School Libraries

The Ministry of Education's recent reporting measures through the GSN are an important first step towards protecting the sustainability of school libraries. They are quantifying the scope of the challenge across Ontario and sending a powerful signal to school boards of the province's recognition of the important role that school libraries and Teacher-Librarians perform in student achievement.

Bill 98, with its clear focus on literacy as a foundational metric of student success, provides powerful new opportunity to build on this success and empower school libraries and Teacher-Librarians to fulfill their natural role as leaders and core resources for student literacy success. In particular, Teacher-Librarians are well-positioned as highly qualified and capable educators in their school communities for supporting student achievement in literacy. As knowledge leaders and experts in reading, they teach students and coach staff by collaborating for early literacy

² [Gearing Up: A Strategic Framework to Help Ontario Middle Years Children Thrive](#), Ministry of Children & Youth Services, Government of Ontario, 2017.

development and reading fluency, aligned with best practices and centering children's identities in reading instruction. OLA and OSLA strongly recommend that the implementation of Bill 98 reflect this key principle through the following:

- Through regulation and policy, clearly define the integral role of school libraries and Teacher-Librarians for achieving provincial priorities in literacy and reading;
- Likewise, integrate the Ministry of Education's existing, enhanced reporting requirements for school library funding into any enhanced framework for school board financial reporting and transparency; and
- As part of the Ministry of Education's commitment to hire 700 specialized literacy educators, require that school boards prioritize the hiring of qualified Teacher-Librarians if the board does not currently achieve the level of investment in school library staff set out by the [provincial per student funding formula](#).

OLA and OSLA welcome the opportunity to continue to work in partnership with the Ministry of Education and school boards across Ontario to help ensure that students across Ontario have access to the supports and resources they need to achieve strong literacy skills.

Sincerely,



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About our organization:

Founded in 1900, the **Ontario Library Association (OLA)** is the oldest continually operating non-profit library association in Canada. With more than 5,000 members, the OLA is the largest library association in the country. We offer opportunities for learning, networking, and providing input into public policy. The **Ontario School Library Association (OSLA)** is a division of OLA consisting of 1,000 members who work in Ontario's school libraries.