



.. ontario school library association

November 23, 2023

Yael Ginsler
Assistant Deputy Minister
Student Achievement Division
Ministry of Education
315 Front Street West, 14th Floor
Toronto, ON, M7A 0B8

Sent by email: yael.ginsler@ontario.ca

Re: Recommendations for improving Grant for Student Needs (GSN) reporting

Dear Ms. Ginsler,

The Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) is the common voice of more than 1,000 school library professionals, including front-line teacher-librarians and school library staff, essential for delivering Ontario's primary and secondary curriculum. Together, we are committed to ensuring that all students across the province have access to a properly staffed and resourced school library as a critical component of student success and achieving curriculum objectives.

As OSLA has previously shared with the Minister and Ministry of Education, access to a properly staffed school library is a proven ingredient for student success and achieving Ontario's curriculum objectives for literacy, research and other critical skills. Over the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of students across Ontario have lost access to school libraries – a trend that has worsened since the pandemic as several of Ontario's largest school boards have made dramatic reductions to school libraries and staff affecting hundreds of thousands of students. OSLA has consistently identified the importance of mandating that the funding provided by the Ministry of Education to school boards for the purposes of school libraries and library staff – over \$230 million annually – is allocated to this critical purpose.

The OSLA recognizes and appreciates the Ministry of Education's shared commitment to the importance of school libraries, demonstrated in the greater emphasis of [the role of the school library](#) in the updated 2023 Language and English curricula, as well as the implementation of enhanced reporting requirements for school library funding through the Grant for Student Needs (GSN).

On May 4, 2021, the Ministry of Education released its 2021-22 GSN which included new, enhanced reporting requirements for library funding. With the completion of these reporting requirements through the 2022-23 GSN cycle, OSLA has had the opportunity to carefully analyze the reporting and results submitted by all school boards across Ontario. What we have identified, and have previously shared with the Ministry of Education, is that:

- A significant percentage of school boards are under-investing in school libraries and school library staff relative to the provincial funding formula – a situation that we anticipate will be demonstrably worse in the next iteration of annual reporting; and
- There is significant variability in the information and reporting submitted by school boards, some of which is difficult to reconcile with what is known about school library investment at the individual school level.

OSLA believes that a continuous improvement approach to annual school libraries reporting is necessary to ensure that the Ministry of Education has consistent, accountable and transparent information about school library investment in Ontario. Furthermore, ensuring that such investments are consistent with the provincial funding formula will contribute demonstrably positive impacts for student success and support for classroom teachers.

In this spirit of constructive feedback and a commitment to ongoing improvement on behalf of students, we are providing several key recommendations for the attention of the Ministry of Education. We welcome the opportunity to discuss these further with your colleagues at an upcoming discussion and are ready and able to contribute to efforts to better ensure that provincial funding for school libraries is allocated for its intended purpose.

Analysis Summary: Grants for Student Needs (GSN) Reporting Data, 2021-22

Recognizing the vital role that school libraries play in student success, the reporting requirements, as introduced by the Ministry of Education under Minister of Education Stephen Lecce, seek to track school boards' spending on school libraries against the provincial formula:

- These reporting requirements were intended to provide the Ministry with greater insight into how school boards are funding school libraries;
- They apply to both the funding provided for library staffing through the Pupil Foundation Grant, as well as the enveloping provision of the Library Staff Allocation in the School Foundation Grant, which also remains in place; and
- School boards that are not fully utilizing the funding provided for library staffing through both grants will be asked by the Ministry of Education to prepare and submit a multi-year plan highlighting their vision and next steps to address any underspending.

This reporting data became [publicly available](#) in March 2023. Through an internal analysis by OSLA, the available data revealed that:

- **31%** of school boards reported underspending on school libraries.
- Collectively, an estimated **\$16.5 million** was reported as *not* being spent on library purposes.
- There is significant **inequity** in library funding across school boards, with smaller school boards and school boards outside of the GTA more likely to reallocate funding intended for library purposes.
- Funding was most often reallocated towards other staffing and technology.

- There was a lack of consistency in reporting across boards, with several boards excluding details on where library funding was reallocated.

Overall, the data indicated that students in less populous and less urban school districts were not receiving the same quality and access to school library resources and professional expertise as their counterparts in larger districts in 2021-22. Given known reductions by several of Ontario's largest school boards, as well as anecdotal information from school library workers across the province, we anticipate the GSN reporting data to be worse in future iterations.

Collecting this data was an important first step in establishing baseline information on how Ontario school boards are using provincial funding intended for school libraries. Moreover, continuing to collect this data overtime is key in ensuring that school boards are held accountable for using funding in accordance with the Ministry's educational priorities. However, any future iteration of GSN reporting must address the following gaps identified in 2021-22 reporting:

1. Mechanisms for ensuring accurate reporting by school boards;
2. Differentiation between school library funding at the board vs. school level;
3. Differentiation between funding spent on staffing vs. resources and capital; and
4. A definitive plan on how multi-year plans will be implemented and evaluated.

Recommendations for Improving GSN Reporting on School Library Funding

1. Improved consistency and transparency in board-level reporting

- Provide school boards with a report template and sample responses to ensure that school boards have a clear understanding of reporting expectations and the level of specificity and detail required.
- Reporting should clearly define, distinguish and separate reporting for funding allocated to resources, staff and capital.

2. Implementation of provincial commitments related to accountability and continuous improvement

- Initiate the multi-year planning requirement for the upcoming GSN year for those school boards that reported underspending in the 2021-22 school year. This should be informed by a clear framework and guidance about what is required in these plans and the range of appropriate investments.
- Create an evaluation matrix for assessing multi-year plans to assess their applicability and feasibility, developed in collaboration with external input from school boards and school library professionals.

- Designate an assigned lead within the Ministry of Education tasked with ensuring ongoing accountability for the delivery of multi-year plans, and to build greater collaboration between the Ministry, school boards and school library professionals on this important priority.
- Create a provincially recognized job description and education requirement for the role of teacher-librarian, which will establish a benchmark of expectations for the position in delivering the Ministry's priorities and ensure accountability and transparency in staff funding allocation.

3. Greater integration of school library professionals in the reporting and planning process

- Each board should ensure that annual reporting and multi-year planning are developed, reviewed and signed off on by the Library Services Coordinator or Manager, or a qualified individual designated with this responsibility by the school board. This will ensure that both reporting and plans are overseen by individuals with professional understanding of the functions and operations of the school library commons.

The OSLA welcomes the opportunity to review these recommendations with Ministry staff, as well as provide support in the continuous improvement of the GSN reporting process. By keeping school boards accountable for the use of provincial funding for school libraries, and thereby in conformity with new expectations set by the Ministry of Education, we can ensure that students across Ontario have equitable access to the support they need to excel in core academic skills and prepare for future success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Johanna Gibson-Lawler".

Johanna Gibson-Lawler
President
Ontario School Library Association

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Arbuckle".

Michelle Arbuckle
Executive Director
Ontario Library Association

Cc: Dianne Oliphant, Director, Skills Development & Apprenticeship Branch, Ministry of Education