

Supporting Ontario's Public Libraries to Empower Local Economic Growth and Student Success

Ontario Library Association & Federation of Ontario Public Libraries 2024-25 Pre-Budget Submission

Public and school libraries are the foundation for success for millions of Ontarians in communities of all sizes.

As part of the 2024-25 Pre-Budget consultation process, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) and the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries (FOPL) are bringing forward priority recommendations on behalf of both Ontario's public and school libraries. These will empower entrepreneurship and small businesses, newcomer integration and support from vulnerable communities, as well as give students the skills they need to succeed in every community across the province.

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.
- Working alongside First Nations Public Library leaders, implement a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve to ensure that these important local hubs are fully-funded and viable. As an immediate first step, **enhance the existing direct provincial funding support for public libraries on reserve (the First Nations Salary Supplement)** to sustainably fund library operations and ensure a living income for frontline library staff in these communities.
- **Increase provincial operating funding for Ontario's public libraries** to address critical shared priorities and community needs.

School Libraries

- **Mandate that school boards must spend funding allocated by the Ministry of Education for school libraries, staffing and resources** on this critical component for student success. They should also be made to fully complete the corresponding accountability and planning measures now required under the Grants for Student Needs.

Public Libraries

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.
- The situation for public libraries located on First Nations Reserves in Ontario is even more challenging, as these libraries do not receive funding from a community tax base. This has overburdened a funding model that has left many public libraries on reserve closed or with severely reduced access.

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 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.
- 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. According to the 2022 Annual Survey of Public Libraries, only 147 of our 363 library systems are able to afford subscriptions to five (5) or more databases. Meanwhile, 67 public libraries reported having zero (0) database subscriptions; majority of which are public libraries on reserve.
- 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 ODPL 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 and contribute and compete.
- *Projected cost:* \$10 million - \$20 million / annually.¹

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

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 Sport 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.

Working alongside First Nations Public Library leaders, implement a sustainable funding model for public libraries on reserve to ensure that these important local hubs are fully-funded and viable.

As an immediate first step, enhance the existing direct provincial operating funding support for public libraries on reserve to sustainably fund library operations and ensure a living income for frontline library staff in these communities.

- 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. Provincial funding through the First Nation Salary Supplement Grant (FNSS) accounts for most of the funding, providing on average \$15,000/year to each of the existing public libraries on reserve. Band Councils must therefore allocate essential funding support such as rent, hydro, internet, fax, and telephone services.
- 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 – librarian, archivist, community liaison, fundraiser, administrator, tech support, and more. 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 39 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.

Recommended Priority:

- As an immediate first step, the First Nations Salary Supplement must be increased to ensure that all existing staff of public libraries on reserve are fairly compensated for the work they perform.
- *Projected cost:* \$2 million / annually (First Nation Salary Supplement increase for existing public libraries on reserve).

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, addiction and mental health, 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:
 - Supporting economic recovery through job training and skills development;
 - Addressing the community impacts of mental health and addictions;
 - Providing services and resources to assist with high-needs members of the community such as seniors, newcomers, working families and all vulnerable members; and
 - 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.

School Libraries

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.

- Schools with libraries and trained library staff see better outcomes on the Grade 3 and 6 EQAO assessments.
- School libraries, especially at the elementary level, foster students' love of reading, which has a positive impact on literacy scores, success in science and students' social and civic engagement.
- Moreover, teacher-librarians serve as literacy leaders and provide support and expertise to the entire school. Teacher-librarians gauge reading abilities, interests and capabilities of the student population and work in tandem with other staff to advance literacy at their schools.
- The Ministry of Education recognizes 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).

Priorities

Mandate that school boards must spend funding allocated by the Ministry of Education for school libraries, staffing and resources on this critical component for student success, and fully complete the corresponding accountability and planning measures now required under the Grants for Student Needs.

- Over the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of students across Ontario have lost access to school libraries – and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout has accelerated this alarming trend.
- 1 out of 3 of school boards reported spending less than the provincial per-student funding formula for school libraries and library staff in 2021-22.
- Since then, several of Ontario's largest school boards have made dramatic reductions to school libraries and library staff affecting hundreds of thousands of students.
- Every year, Ontario provides over \$230 million to school boards for school libraries and library staff, in accordance with a per-student funding formula. Less than 10% of that funding is explicitly required to be used – or enveloped – for school libraries.
- Beginning last year, the Ministry of Education now requires school boards to report annually on how provincial funding is used to meet the provincial expectations for school library investments.
- For those boards underinvesting in school libraries and library staff, multi-year plans will be required to bring that level of investment up to provincial expectations.
- The Ontario School Library Association (OSLA), a division of OLA, is engaging with the Ministry of Education to improve these reporting requirements and to support the implementation of the multi-year plan requirements.
- OSLA continues to advocate that the Ministry of Education mandate that school boards must

spend this allocated funding on school libraries.

- This approach respects the independence of school boards by ensuring local flexibility on how best to use this funding in support of school library programs and staffing, as long as all such funds are invested consistently with the province's funding formula.
 - This important step will protect and restore access for all Ontario students to this critical learning resource – no matter where they live in the province.
 - *Projected cost:* No additional direct cost; requires greater accountability and transparency in the use of existing provincial funding.
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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:
 - A suite of online resources for a full subscription year with unlimited, 24/7 and simultaneous access, and
 - 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Health and Small Business reference</i> • <i>Language learning</i> • <i>Consumer Reports</i> • <i>Legal forms and templates</i> • <i>Magazines and News in 70 languages</i> • <i>French e-books</i> • <i>Auto Repair</i> • <i>Genealogy</i> • <i>Self Publishing</i>
\$15 million (recommended)	18	General and Advanced – all content listed above and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>K-12 e-content</i> • <i>Live Tutoring</i> • <i>Resume and Job coaching</i>
\$20 million	22	General, Advanced and Specialized - all content listed above and: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Online learning courses, including business essentials</i> • <i>Wellness and personal development</i>

* 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.