



Submission to the Minister's Community Hub Framework Advisory Group

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF/FEESO) welcomes the opportunity to provide valuable advice and insight into the development of a framework for adapting existing public assets to become community hubs. This submission is hopefully the start of collaboration with the Advisory Group as the development of the community hubs framework moves forward.

OSSTF/FEESO is a trade union that represents 60,000 members across the Province of Ontario. The union works to protect our diverse membership in over 150 bargaining units in elementary and secondary schools, private schools, and universities. Our members include public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, early childhood educators, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, university support staff, and many others in education.

It is clear that the impetus for the development of the framework community hubs is to address this complex and important issue. The suggestion that "there needs to be a cultural shift in how we think about coordinating services in our communities and how we need to remove the silos in service delivery" is in part the result of the current fiscal climate in Ontario.

OSSTF/FEESO acknowledges that as a province we are faced with difficult decisions around the economy, spending and deficits. We believe that investment in education as well as social services, health care and recreation is an essential pre-condition for stimulating economic growth and development in our province.

We caution against an approach that focuses on quantity over quality. We also caution that any framework is developed and implemented within the limitations of physical and human resources required for the maintenance of the *primary* role of the school, and the education of students. In an earlier submission to the Declining Enrolment Task Force, a number of useful and practical recommendations were made that could lead to thriving elementary and secondary schools with lower class sizes and comprehensive services.

The OSSTF/FEESO submission included the following: "Student distribution and school configuration must be considered above political, religious and union demands to provide a sound education for all. Having access to all schools in a geographical area and the freedom to create configurations that respond to enrolment and demographic shifts is essential to responding to this dramatic enrolment drop."

School boards must resist the obvious and easiest paths in response to declining enrolment, which are simply to make drastic budget cuts and/or close schools as well as outsource services to outside agencies that are not familiar with students and their needs and have not previously provided services and resources in an educational setting.

After being starved of funds year after year, and being forced to reallocate resources away from certain sites, trustees often face the unenviable task of closing the local school, laying off staff and closing programs or shifting them to community providers.

Funding must be provided to allow greater community no-fee access to school facilities such as pools, gyms, libraries and meeting spaces. This will build a greater sense of community where local organizations can be provided no-fee access to some spaces in school buildings.

However, there are too many ministries including health and social services that are outsourcing jobs and hiring more temporary staff as part of a largely bureaucratic response to real need in areas such as the speech and language development of children. It is not clear which ministry will oversee the implementation of community hubs once a framework is developed, and where the accountability will rest for the appropriate allocation of resources and the successful implementation of the community hubs as communities develop their own strategies.

Each of the current 72 boards is, in one way or another, grappling with the same dilemma. While one solution cannot be imposed from above, some short-term relief can be found from the bottom up. Working with the provincial and municipal levels of government, unused school space can be used to provide a variety of services that are needed both at the school and in the community.

The school is, and will continue to be, the hub of the community. The school is considered the safe, comfortable center of activity in a small community or the fixture in a neighbourhood of a larger urban centre. In many cases, the economic viability of the area is directly reliant on the existence of that school. It is often the most appropriate location for facilities that the greater community depends upon.

David Clandfield, author, educator and former school board trustee, was an advisor in the Rae government, looking at integrating services within schools in the early 1990s. He recently edited a collection of global experiences in *School as Community Hub: Beyond Education's Iron Cage* (ourschools/ourselves, summer 2010).

In the opening chapter, he situates hubs along a five-point continuum, extending from the basic community use of schools to the fully integrated school-community relationship, from the simplest form of permitting eligible community groups to book school space for use after hours to the co-location of community services within a single plot of land that may house a school or daycare, a parenting centre, adult education classes etc., and be funded by not only the school board, but also by the local municipality.

Clandfield argues that the proper relationship of a school/community hub goes beyond rationalizing services and the use of space. It requires us to imagine a different community school: the Two Way Hub, "one where children's learning activities within the school contribute to community development and when community activities contribute to and enrich children's learning within the school." He states, "This does not mean that the school dilutes its commitment to the development of critical literacy and numeracy or to the phased development of higher-order critical thinking over the years of compulsory education. It does mean that what the community has by way of knowledge and skills flows into and across a curriculum based on really useful knowledge—engaging its students in understanding and changing the world."

Recommendations:

1. THAT in the short term, the ministry freeze any further school closures or sales.
2. THAT the framework is developed and implemented within the limitations of the requirement to maintain the primary role of the school, and the education of students.

June 15, 2015
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